

Malcolm Saville

SAUCERS

over the

MOOR



A LONE PINE ADVENTURE

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Saucers Over The Moor

Malcolm Saville

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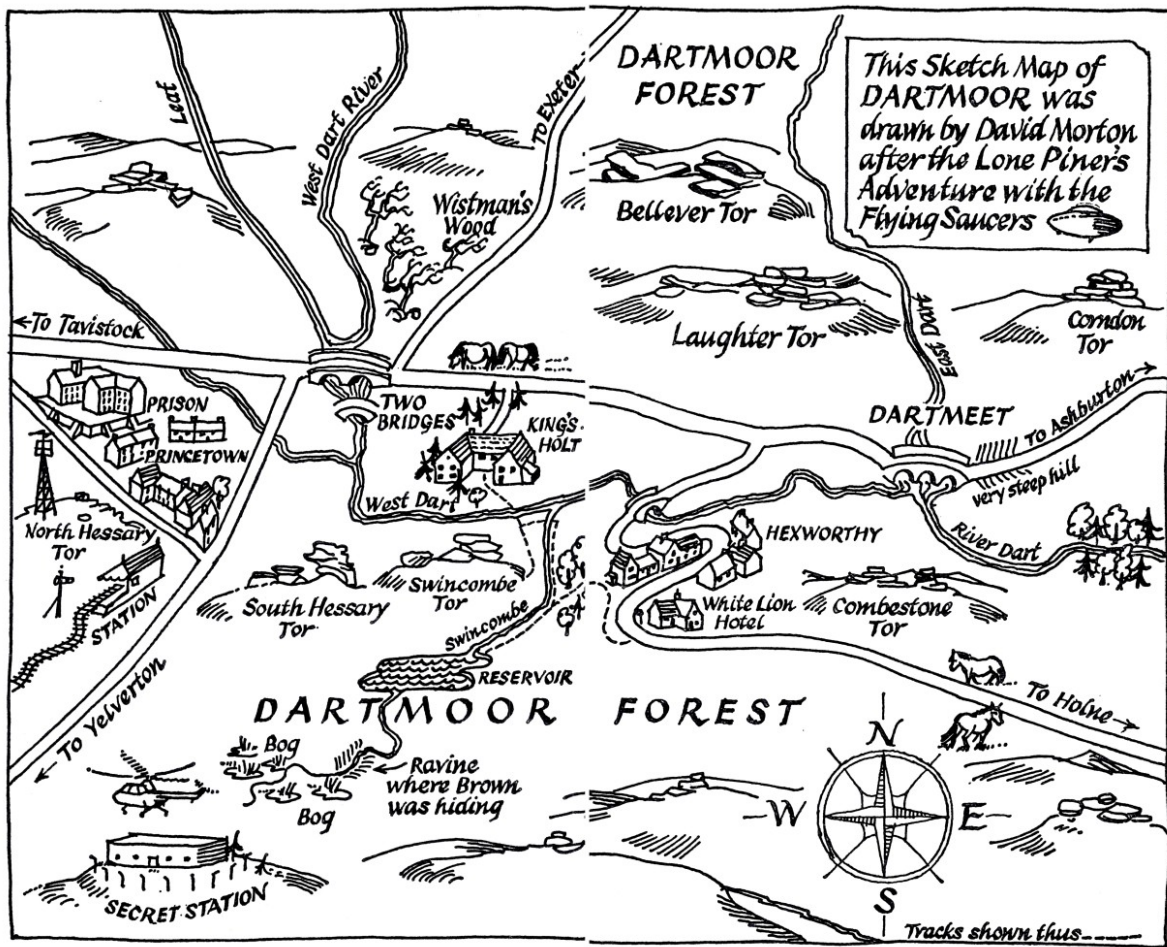
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To my daughter Rosemary

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Foreword

Like all the other Lone Pine books, the scene of this story is set in a part of England you can explore yourself. Many of my readers will probably have seen Dartmoor from one of the two main roads which cross it from north to south and east to west. But those who see the Moor from a car or a coach will never really know it, nor catch more than a glimpse of its mystery, its sometimes forbidding grandeur, or even its romance.

The Moor does not change much as the years pass. It is rugged, magnificent and unforgettable. A television mast is not likely to last as long as the curiously shaped Tors which must have looked much the same as they do today to the prehistoric men, who we know to have lived on the Moor some 4,000 years ago.

This is a new edition of a story which was first written in 1955 and so I must explain what is real and what imaginary. Ashburton, where Peter and David started their adventure is real. So is Dartmeet, Two Bridges, Hexworthy and Princetown as you will see on the map. There is no hotel called the White Lion, no house called King's Holt, nor so far as I know, no cafe in Princetown called the Moorland Pixie. There is no mysterious "Secret Station" high up by the source of the Swincombe. The little railway line on which Dan Sturt travelled from Plymouth to Princetown is closed now, more's the pity, but if you are clever you can find the mysterious Wistmans Wood.

As for the "Flying Saucers" which the Lone Piners saw and heard, and about which there was so much fuss and secrecy in this story, it is true that we, in the seventies, do not hear so much about "Unidentified Flying Objects" as we did fifteen or twenty years ago. But photographs have been taken of what certain scientists believe to be "Flying Saucers", and in many parts of the world people claim to have seen them.

Anyway the saucers in this story are as imaginary as the people about which I have written, but I hope you will like them none the less for that.

M.S.

The Lone Pine Club

If this is the first of the nineteen stories about the members of the Lone Pine Club which you have read, you will probably enjoy it more if you know something about them before you begin.

The Club was started by some boys and girls at a lonely old house called Witchend in the heart of the Shropshire Hills. The simple rules of the Club - the most important of which is, "to be true to each other whatever happens" are set out in full in the first book called *Mystery at Witchend*. As most of the members live many miles apart and go to different schools they can only meet in the holidays, and although they have been sharing adventures for many years their ages remain about the same.

The headquarters of the Club is still the old camp under the sentinel pine tree at Witchend; but others have been established as the need arose. The Lone Piners secret signal to each other is a whistled imitation of the peewit's plaintive call.

The Members

DAVID MORTON aged 16. Captain of the Club and a good, steady and dependable leader. The Mortons live in London, but Witchend belongs to the family and they all go there whenever they can in the holidays.

RICHARD ("DICKIE") and MARY MORTON are ten-year-old identical twins. They go to different schools but are inseparable at all other times. Astonishingly alike in looks and speech. Infuriating to most adults when they pretend to be much younger than their age. Courageous, warmhearted and loyal to each other and their friends.

PETRONELLA ("PETER") STERLING is 16 and vice-captain of the Club. No brothers, sisters nor mother but lives with her father in a cottage near Witchend. Goes to school in Shrewsbury. A lovely, fair-haired girl who loves the open-air and can swim and ride better than any boy of her age.

Does not make friends easily but her life was changed when the Mortons came to Witchend and she met David.

JONATHAN WARRENDER, known to his friends as "Jon" is nearly 17. Tall, with spectacles, he is usually vague and untidy. Like most clever people he is not talkative. No father, brothers or sisters but when home from school lives with his mother who owns the Gay Dolphin hotel in the little town of Rye where he first met the Mortons. His schoolgirl cousin who also lives at the Dolphin in the holidays is -

PENELOPE ("PENNY") WARRENDER who is nearly a year his junior. She is grey-eyed with all the qualities and defects which go with red hair! Affectionate, gay, loyal and independent and a rare fighter for her friends and for what she believes to be right. Her parents, who come home in this story, have been abroad for nearly three years. She would cheerfully follow Jon to the end of the world!

There are three other members of the Club who do not appear in this story: TOM INGLES who works on his uncle's farm near Witchend, JENNY HARMAN, age 15, who lives not far away, and the latest recruit HARRIET SPARROW who lives in London and is a special friend of the twins. Finally there is MACBETH ("MACKIE") Morton, the little black Scottie dog who is rarely parted from the twins but who loves and serves them all.

1. Home Again

The train rattled along the straight railway line which runs along the western edge of Romney Marsh from Ashford in Kent to the town of Rye.

From the window of a compartment in the front coach a red-headed girl stood watching for her first sight of the little town which had come to mean so much to her since her parents had gone abroad nearly three years ago. Not only was Penny Warrender coming home to the beloved Gay Dolphin - the hotel in Trader's Street kept by her aunt - but coming back with the certainty that within a week her father and mother would be home for six months at least. No wonder her heart banged with excitement. She always felt like this on the first day of the holidays, and although she was the sort of girl who made the best of every situation and did not really mind school, the summer holidays were something to be looked forward to all the year.

Penny was nearly sixteen, with clear, grey, wide-set eyes and a freckled nose rather nicely tip-tilted. Although quick-tempered and impetuous she had a way with her which made her many friends.

The train swung a little to the west and then, as she had expected, she saw Rye, a huddle of grey walls and red roofs clinging to its rocky hill, crowned by the church tower with the lazy summer sun glinting on its gilded weather vane.

And only a few hundred yards away from the church, down the cobbles of Trader's Street, was the dear old Dolphin. She wondered whether her aunt or cousin Jonathan would be at the station to meet her.

She leaned from the window and almost before she realized it, Aunt Margaret was helping her out with the luggage and giving her a hug of welcome.

"Let me look at you, Penny. You seem to be as untidy as usual and I'm sure you're hot and grubby. There's a fat air-mail letter from your father waiting for you at home. It is nice to see you again."

Penny felt tears spring to her eyes. Nobody could be kinder to her than Aunt Margaret who had always treated her as a daughter.

"I'm sorry I look untidy," she laughed. "It's just these loathsome school clothes. I believe they make us wear these ghastly garments just to humiliate us. I'll fling them off just as soon as I get in. May we walk home?"

"Of course. We'll leave the luggage and Vasson will pick it up in the car presently."

It was all just the same. Country people and holiday-makers waiting for buses in the station yard. The smell of hot tar. The hollyhocks standing like sentinels along the black fence. The crowds in Cinque Ports Street and an artist at the corner of every cobbled street. Penny and her aunt strolled in the sunshine up Lion Street to the church, and as Penny paused to look up at the great clock the two Quarter Boys lifted their hammers and struck their bells as the hands pointed to a quarter to three.

"Are you busy, darling?" Penny said as they turned into Trader's Street. "Is the Dolphin full?"

"All I can manage, Penny. We're doing well, but don't worry, I haven't put anybody in your room... Aren't you going to ask about Jon?"

Penny felt herself going pink, but was too honest to pretend that she was not interested.

"He hasn't written for about six weeks. Has he broken up yet? Not that we can't manage without him, of course!"

"Of course we can, Penny. He's not been very good about writing to me this term either, but we must forgive him. I know he's been working very hard and he did admit once that his science master is pleased with him."

"Science!" Penny sighed. "Science is a closed book to me, and I hope it stays closed. I like learning things about real people... But when is he coming?"

"Tonight," Mrs Warrender smiled. "We'll have a little celebration dinner..."

Trader's Street, running north and south along the crest of Rye's hill-top, was perfect. Grass was still growing between the cobbles and every house was different. There were little white houses with black doors and black and white houses with coloured doors. Brass gleamed behind windows, geraniums flamed in window-boxes, and gaily-coloured nasturtiums rioted up door-posts. A few hundred yards away Rye's narrow streets were full of crowds and traffic, but here, where smugglers were once hunted by the King's Redcoats, all was now at peace, and sleek cats drowsed on doorsteps in the summer sun. At the end of the street, on the right, hung the sign of the dolphin with the same wicked look in his eye, and Penny slipped her arm through her aunt's as she realized that she was really home again. They turned into the shadows under the archway above which the Dolphin was built. On the left was an open door marked "Hotel Only," and opposite another door painted white with "Private" on it. Then from the yard came a slight, brown-faced man in a white jacket. This was Fred Vasson, the Dolphin's porter and handyman and almost a family friend. His eyes were very blue and his hair bleached the colour of straw, but his smile of welcome and outstretched hand to Penny made her feel that she had never been away.

"It's wonderful to be home, Fred. And did you know that my mother and father are really coming next Friday? Actually coming *here* to live until they find a house. Did you know that, Fred?"

Fred smiled and nodded.

"Grand news that be," he drawled.

"I'm so excited I feel a bit sick," Penny confessed. "We'll have a good gossip soon, Fred. I'll come and find you when you're not too busy... Please don't forget my luggage at the station."

"Go up by yourself, Penny," Mrs Warrender said as she opened the white door. "As soon as you're ready, come down to tea. Your green dress is on the bed."

Penny nodded her thanks and ran up the polished oak stairs, along a landing into another narrow passage, and then up what she always thought of as her own private stairway, twisting steeply to the threshold of her own lovely little room snug under the roof. There was hardly space for her to turn round, but it was her very own - the place where nobody, not even her aunt, would come unless invited. The windows with their leaded panes were open but no breeze stirred the curtains. There was a bowl of yellow roses on the window-ledge, and on the dressing-table a fat air-mail envelope, plastered with exciting-looking but familiar stamps, was waiting for her. Should she change before she read it? It was sure to be worth waiting for, and rather surprisingly she withstood the temptation of opening it until she was clean and tidy. Then she sat on the bed and opened the envelope. It contained two letters - one from her mother and the other, a much longer one, from her father. He did not write to her often, so news from him was always specially exciting. She picked up her mother's first.

"... So excited, Penny that I must feel like you do when you come home from school. Only a few days now and we shall actually see you at the Airport... Daddy has the most wonderful plans which he has been keeping secret until now, and I'm not going to spoil the surprise by telling you myself. But I shall love it and I hope you all will, too. No doubt it's lonely, but I'm longing to explore that exciting country and do some really good sketches... If you only knew how we long to see a friendly English landscape. Green grass, purple heather, hills blue in the distance..."

Penny put down the letter. Suddenly, although she had never been to the East, she realized what her mother meant about England. Then she picked up the thicker letter and saw that, as usual, her father addressed her as "My dear Penelope." He was the only person who called her Penelope because he did not, he often said, hold with abbreviations, particularly if the name was a nice one. The first two pages were just warm and affectionate, but did not suggest any surprise or secret. Page three was different. This was what she read:

"Now for some plans about which we hope you will approve. Although we are much looking forward to staying at the Dolphin when we first arrive, we do not feel that it is fair to your aunt to stay too long in a room which she

could easily fill at this time of year. Your mother and I have been talking this over and longing so much to see England again that we have been really homesick. I think you know that we do not pine for London, but I have a new car on order and we want to go off to the West Country which has held many happy memories for us. I want some fishing, your mother wants to sketch and we both want wild and unspoiled British country. We thought we'd find a large house so that we could entertain any friends you may like to invite during the summer holidays. We are sure that you'd like to ask Jonathan and possibly some other young friends of which you have told us and sent us photographs. And so without letting you into our secret I have been busy for several months with estate agents in Devonshire and Cornwall and only three days ago did I receive a cable from a man in Plymouth saying that all was well.

"Here, then, is our surprise for you. I have rented furnished for six months an old house called King's Holt in the heart of Dartmoor, but which, I understand, is only about a quarter of a mile up a drive from the main east-west road crossing the Moor. I have been studying maps of the district for a long time, and you had better get one, too - or ask Jonathan to get one. A few hundred yards away from the back of the house runs the River Dart, and King's Holt itself although isolated, is fairly near a hotel at Two Bridges and Princetown to the west, and the tiny village of Hexworthy, with another hotel to the east. My large-scale map shows many streams which I shall fish and many Tors, as the heights of the Moor are called. We know that you and your young friends like wild and lonely country to explore, and it seemed to us that you may find King's Holt itself amusing as a holiday centre.

"We are taking risks, of course, and may find it impossible as a temporary home. If we do we will pack up and find somewhere else. We can but try, and we do hope that you will be as excited about this plan as we are. King's Holt is big enough to take all your friends, who, if they are prepared to take pot luck with us there, are very welcome guests. If it is not too late, why not invite the Mortons and any other of your Shropshire friends to join us when they can? We leave this to you, but there are six bedrooms on the first floor and the living-rooms seem to be very large. The house will be ready for us by the time you read this, and I hope the agents are going to find us

someone to help with the chores. I do not think we should stay at the Dolphin more than a week. We hope, my dear, that this idea pleases you..."

When she had finished the rest of this marvellous letter, her cheeks were pink with excitement. Photographs and weekly air-letters were wonderful, of course, but it was difficult to know just exactly what her mother and father were *like* now. But this wonderful father of hers was actually suggesting that she could bring her friends so that her parents would get to know them, too. He seemed to understand that after a week at the Dolphin, when they would learn to know each other all over again, a holiday in an exciting new place with her friends was exactly right. How clever of him to know that they all loved old houses and wild, unspoiled country! He had not forgotten Jon, either, and it would be grand to have David Morton and the twins, Dickie and Mary. Then there was Petronella Sterling up in Shropshire. If the Mortons were able to come and had not planned for Witchend until later, she knew that they would want to have Peter, as everyone called her, with them. And then there were Tom and Jenny, the other members of their Lone Pine Club. Both these friends lived in Shropshire, too, but Penny was sure that Tom, who worked on his uncle's farm, would be too busy with the harvest to have a holiday; and Jenny generally went over to help him in August.

The Mortons lived in London, and it would be easy enough to telephone now to see whether they were at home. Then she remembered that David might well have written to Jon and told him about the Morton's holiday plans, and that it would be more sensible to wait until six o'clock, when she could tell her cousin all about it. Penny hated waiting for anything but as she got off the bed she knew that she would wait. Then she ran down to tell her aunt the news.

"Do you think Jon will be as thrilled as I am, Auntie? Don't you think my father is wonderful?"

"Yes, Penny. And I think this Dartmoor holiday is a grand idea. I had a letter today, too, but I didn't want to spoil your surprise. Later on - perhaps by the end of September or before you go back to school - I'm going to try to come down to King's Holt myself and see you all. The Dolphin won't be as full then, and I shall need a holiday... Of course, Jon will be thrilled. Go

down to the station and meet him and tell him all about it. Six o'clock isn't a very good time for me as I have to keep an eye on the kitchen."

Penny looked under her lashes at her aunt and then decided not to argue. She might as well go down to the station as anything else, she supposed.

And so, at five minutes to six, Penny now dressed very differently, was again at the station. The train was punctual. As it stopped she leaned back against the tarred fence, and tried not to look as eager and excited as she felt, when she saw Jon help an elderly woman out with her luggage and then look round vaguely. Then he lifted his own two heavy bags as if they were shopping baskets and walked past Penny as if in a dream.

"Hello," she said in rather a small voice. "Hello, Jon."

He stopped and stared.

"Why, it's you! Little Newpenny. What have you been doing to yourself? Growing up or something?"

He put down his bags and laughed, "Have you come to meet me?"

"I came down to get something for your mother and just happened to be passing this way. I remembered then that she'd told me you would be on this train."

"I see," he said cheerfully, but rather vaguely. "How's Mother?"

"Very well and as nice as usual."

They went out together into the station yard. Jon never had much to say, but Penny knew that he was happy and excited to be home again. When they got to the end of Trader's Street he put down the bags, stretched his fingers and said, "I'll never forget the first day we saw the Dolphin will you, Penny? It was a day like this. Sun shining and everything in the street warm and comfortable. Seems a long time ago... What's your news anyway? You never tell me anything."

"Well! I like that..." Penny gasped. Then, "You're hopeless, Jon. When you've unpacked I've got some marvellous news for you... Come on."

Penny ran up to her room again so that Jon and his mother would have a chance to talk by themselves, but was very pleased when, ten minutes later, her cousin shouted up the stairs, "Come and help me unpack, Penny. I want to hear your news."

Jon's room was on the floor below in the front of the hotel. It had a window jutting over the pavement from which it was possible to see beyond the end of the street which stopped at the top of the cliff on which the town was built. The window had been built like this, he had been told, so that a light set in it would be visible to smugglers waiting to enter the town. There was little doubt that the Dolphin was once used by the "Traders" as the smugglers were then called.

So Penny ran down her winding stair to Jon and noticed with dismay that he had emptied the contents of his two bags on to the bed. There were some clothes, but at least fifteen dull-looking books.

She picked up a fat one and shuddered.

"Do you really like all this physics and science stuff, Jon. I suppose you must do?"

He sighed, sat on the edge of the bed and stretched his legs.

"I s'pose I do, Penny. Fact is I'm dead keen. Haven't told Mother yet but I'm having a go for a scholarship."

"Jon! You must be absolutely *brilliant*!"

He laughed uneasily. "Don't say anything yet. I'm thinking what it would mean to me and to her if I could get to University... Now tell me the news. Mother says your people will be here next Friday."

"Just listen to this," and taking the important letter from her pocket Penny sat down on the bed and read him everything except the first two pages.

As soon as she had finished, Jon got up and rummaged along his book shelves.

"Why don't you say something, Jon," she stormed. "Aren't you thrilled about it? What are you looking for, anyway?"

"Book on Dartmoor. I've got one somewhere. Maps too. Did I ever tell you I collect maps... What's the matter?"

Why could he not understand that she only wanted him to be pleased that he was the first one to be asked to join them at King's Holt? But he did seem to realize how she felt about this because he came over to her again and ruffled her hair.

"Sorry, Penny. I think it's a grand idea. I've never been to Dartmoor and I don't know how to thank your father for asking me to come down with you... But don't you think you should go with them alone? Won't they want you to themselves? Seems odd of course, but then they don't know you as well as I do... All right! All right! I was only trying to be funny. Mother told me she'd like me to get away and forget physics. But are you sure you want me when you first go down there?"

"Daddy has chosen King's Holt specially. We've got to learn to know each other again, but I'm sure he wants me to have my friends there as well. It's wonderful of him to think of it, Jon. Your mother thinks it is too. See what I mean?"

Jon nodded. "I do, Newpenny. I want to come. And thanks for meeting me at the station. That green dress is pretty good."

Penny gasped with surprise. Everything was all right now and they could get down to business!

Jon then told her that he had not heard from David for a month, but was sure that he had told him at the beginning of the term that the Mortons were not going to Witchend until September.

"I s'pose we've got to have the twins if David comes," he went on. "They'll get lost on the Moor or locked up in the prison and be a nuisance to everybody. They're only kids, Penny. You know they are."

"Yes, they are; but they've done some grand things with us, Jon, and anyway they're members of the Club, although I s'pose you think you're too old for that now. I think you are too, but you can't get out of it as you've sworn to be true to us all till death do us part! And don't try and look superior because you're *not*! Seriously though, we'll have to ask Dickie and Mary if we ask David. And David will want to ask Peter, which will be grand. Why don't you ring up David now? I wanted to as soon as I'd read the letter but I was decent enough to wait for you."

"I'll ring after dinner," Jon said. "Time enough then. Just help me to clear up this mess and then I'll go and have a bath."

Half an hour later Jon, Penny and Mrs Warrender were sitting down to their meal.

"Tell us about the Dolphin, Mother," Jon said. "We just don't know what goes on in this place while we're away. What sort of people have you got? In a day or two, when you're not looking, we shall mingle with your guests and find out for ourselves."

He winked at Penny across the table because they both knew that Mrs Warrender's strictest rule was that they were never to go into the public rooms when the hotel was busy. The family had a corner table in the dining-room, and that was the only chance the cousins had of examining guests.

"You will *not* mingle, as you very well know," Mrs Warrender smiled. "But I'm sure we haven't anyone exciting or mysterious here now."

"Any nice families? Anyone of my age?" Penny asked.

"Two nice families but the children are all under ten."

"Any mysterious, lonely spinsters?" Jon insisted. "Any eccentric artists or solitary gentlemen in tweed suits?"

His mother laughed. "I don't think we've any lonely spinsters, Jon, but there is a man in a tweed suit. A nice, quiet little man who goes out every day with a packet of sandwiches, a camera and field-glasses. I've forgotten his name but I think it was Fred who told me that he's keen on birds."

"Very suspicious," Penny said, helping herself to salad as someone knocked at the door.

It was Fred Vasson.

"Beg pardon, Mrs Warrender, but I've summat to report. I reckoned you ought to know right away."

"Something serious, Fred? Do you want me to come outside?"

Fred shook his head. "No need for that. It's about that Mr Green-----"

"That's the man's name," Mrs Warrender interrupted. "That was who I was trying to think of, Penny. He's the bird watcher."

Vasson looked astonished.

"It's a purty big bird what's bit him now," he said unexpectedly. "That's what I reckoned you ought to know about. It's like this. I were at the front door ten minutes afore dinner and everyone else in dining-room, when up Trader's Passage comes this Mr Green. I could see right away he looked bad and then I notice he's got one hand tucked inside his jacket, and when he comes closer I can see that hand is wrapped round with an old handkerchief all smothered in blood... I ask him what's wrong and he speaks like he never spoke to me afore - fair snapped me head off if you know what I mean."

Mrs Warrender nodded. Fred was making a very long speech.

"Long and short of it is," Vasson went on, "he told me to ring up doctor at once and ask him to come round and give him some first-aid like for an injured hand. And that's all he'd say and now he's locked hisself in his room... I phoned Dr Valentine and he says he'll be round in half an hour... I was wondering, though, if you'd care to ask Mr Green whether there's

anything else we could be doing for him? I knocked on his door again and told him about the doctor and he sounded real peevish... Not like him at all because he's been a friendly little gentleman up to now."

"But Fred, he'll ring if he's in trouble, surely? There's a first-aid set in the office, isn't there? Did you offer him that?"

"I did not. I was too took aback, but maybe if you was to ask him he might listen to you. He won't listen to me."

"Very well, Fred, but I think you're making a fuss about nothing. Dr Valentine will look after him."

"He looked very bad. Faint like. I reckon it would be a good idea if you was to knock on his door and-----"

"Very well, Fred, and thank you for telling me about it. I'll come at once."

She was back in five minutes looking rather cross.

"Fred was right," she admitted as she closed the door behind her. "Mr Green sounds very annoyed and wouldn't even open his door when I told him who I was. He was thoroughly ungracious and said that all he wants is a doctor as quickly as possible... Sorry for the interruption. Let's forget him."

Half an hour later, when they had finished their coffee, Penny persuaded Jon to go and sit with her on the wall at the end of the street only a few yards from the hotel. The Dolphin was the last building in Trader's Street, and although pedestrians could reach the town by going down Trader's Passage on the right, the road itself was too narrow for a car to turn easily. The red brick wall, which was a favourite spot of Penny's, faced south with a view over the Marsh, the tidal river, and beyond that to the shingle waste of Dungeness where the lighthouse was just visible. Just as Jon had helped her up, Dr Valentine arrived. Penny waved to him cheerfully but he only nodded curtly as he turned into the Dolphin carrying a square, black case.

"I'll telephone David now," Jon said. "Crazy of me, but I nearly forgot. Back soon."

So Penny was left alone. The sun was going down in a blaze of glory behind Winchelsea on its wooded hill three miles away. Below her, on the steep side of the cliff, the pink, feathery blooms of tamarisk moved gently in a soft breeze smelling of salt and mud. Then she turned to look east across the Marsh and saw the silver rim of a great moon just rising. A lovely evening and a wonderful end to a perfect day.

As it happened it was not the end, but Penny was not to know that. Then Jon came out shaking his head.

"No reply," he said. "I'm sure they're not away, though. David would have told us if they had been going to Witchend right away. I'll ring again presently."

He leaned on the wall beside Penny.

"Funny about that chap Green. Why didn't he let Mother help him, I wonder? What's he done to himself?... Here's the doctor, Penny. Run over and charm him and find out what's the matter."

Penny nodded, jumped off the wall and ran over to the car. Jon could not hear their conversation, but Dr Valentine drove off quickly, leaving Penny looking rather foolish.

"I don't like that doctor after all," she said as she walked back to Jon. "He used to be decent but now he's snappy and won't tell me anything. As good as told me to mind my own business, Jon. He just told me that Mr Green has hurt his hand (which we know) and is not to be disturbed till he comes tomorrow... I'll tell you what I think, Jon. I think this little Mr Green must be a very mysterious person after all. I don't see how he could get himself into trouble bird-watching, but why is he so secret about hurting his hand? We'll have to find out more about him..."

2. The First Saucer

It was not until after eleven that same evening that Jon went up to his room. His mother and Penny had said "Goodnight" soon after half-past ten, but he was still too excited at being home again to settle down. There was no need to switch on the light for the full moon was shining down Trader's Street. As he sat on his window seat he realized that it was almost light enough to read, so he pushed the window right up and leaned out. All was very still. Away down beyond the town the river, as it twisted between muddy banks, gleamed like a silver ribbon laid across the flat marsh.

Then, from somewhere quite near a door closed - for a moment Jon thought it was the door of the Dolphin - and then he heard soft footsteps. He turned and looked the other way up the street but the shadows on that side were very thick, and although he thought he saw a hurrying figure he could not be sure.

Jon settled down on the window seat again, feeling very wide awake. It seemed hardly possible that he had been home only a few hours for so much to have happened. First the excitement of Penny's news and then the odd incident of Mr Green with the damaged hand about which he had been so secretive.

Then he smiled as he remembered David's excitement when he managed to get him on the telephone. Jon had been as good as his word to Penny, and tried to sound enthusiastic when the twins had been included in the invitation. Their conversation had been interrupted twice by Penny who snatched the receiver and as a result David, the twins and Macbeth the Scottie dog were all coming with them to Devon for at least a fortnight.

"Ask David to telephone Peter to-night," Penny had hissed. "Tell him we want her to come too. Tell him it won't be any fun without her and tell him to tell her to ask Tom and Jenny too, though I don't expect they'll be able to come."

David had been thrilled with this idea and promised to telephone back to Rye in the morning after he had heard from Peter.

Dartmoor! Jon wondered what it was really like and switched on the light and searched his bookshelves again. He was keen on places and liked to read about them even if he had never been there. He had believed that he had a book on Devonshire but could not find it, so made up his mind to go to one of Rye's second-hand book shops tomorrow. It doubled the fun of a holiday to know something about the place before you went.

The more he considered it the more peculiar it seemed that his uncle should wish to take a holiday house in such a lonely part of the country. But it was true that they all - the Lone Piners as they called themselves - had found several adventures in lonely places, and they might well be lucky this time. At this thought Jon smiled again, because although Penny had accused him of being too old to be interested in a secret club he admitted, if only to himself, that it would be good to see David and Peter again - even the twins. Then he realized that he would have considered it a poor sort of holiday if Penny had not been with him. And he had not had time to answer two letters she had written to him in the term and up to now she had not reminded him of it! He grinned ruefully as he got up and stretched.

The Quarter Boys on the church tower at the end of the street struck twice. Half-past eleven. Might as well read in bed for a bit. There was a Sherlock Holmes book about Dartmoor and surely they'd got a volume of Holmes stories somewhere? He kneeled in front of the bookcase again and jumped violently as someone tapped on the door.

"Are you awake, Jon? It's me. Penny!"

He jumped up and opened the door. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, you idiot. Let me in. We've got an idea. A wonderful idea."

"I was just having one too. It was to go to bed and read a book about Dartmoor. Don't say you've had another letter from your father and that now we're going to the Isle of Man?"

She squeezed into the room and shut the door.

"Your mother says we mustn't make a noise because of guests, but I may as well tell you now that if you'd been in bed we were going to have you out... Put on a sweater or something and come along."

"Who's we? What are you talking about and why aren't you in bed?"

"Because after my mother, your mother is the most wonderful woman in the world. We've been chattering and we're neither of us sleepy, and it's such a wonderful night that we thought we'd go out and see it. You're to come, too. Wait for me while I fetch a coat."

Jon never found out what his mother and Penny had been gossiping about for so long, but he did realize how excited and happy his cousin was as they went along to Mrs Warrender's room a few minutes later.

"Good, Jon," she smiled as he helped her on with her coat. "Rye on a night like this is too good to miss. Don't make a noise."

They crept down the stairs to their private door. The yard was still dark but the far side of the street was patterned in black and silver. Penny ran out on to the cobbles and stood for a moment with face upraised.

"You can almost *feel* the moon," she whispered. "It's cool and slippery and clean... It's a night for witches on broomsticks."

"No it isn't. Penny," Mrs Warrender said as she took her arm. "It's a night for Jessica and Lorenzo. Do you remember your *Merchant of Venice*?"

"I do, worse luck. I never liked Portia but I know what you mean. I've always thought those two were rather soppy, but doesn't it go like this -

'How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears
-I've forgotten the rest."

*" 'Soft stillness and the night,
Become the touches of sweet harmony,"*

Jon finished triumphantly. "I bet neither of you ever thought I'd know that! I'm surprised too. We had an English master years ago who made us learn pages of that stuff... Very old-fashioned education! Anyway, there's no music to hear to-night except the church clock and there's no bank to sit on. Where are we going?"

"Up to the Gun Garden," Mrs Warrender suggested. "We shall be able to see for miles from there. But it's the moonlight on these old streets that makes a picture I hope you will never forget... Come along."

Arm in arm they walked up Trader's Street. In one or two upper windows yellow lights still gleamed and on a whitened doorstep two cats crouched staring at each other with green eyes. Ahead of them loomed the bulk of the great church - most of it in shadow but with one side of the tower glistening cold and pale in the silvery light of the moon. They passed the church on their left and then turned south into a short street of half timbered houses jutting over the pavement. All was quiet and Jon stopped for a moment before the great bulk of the Ypres Tower at the end of the street. This ancient castle with its four towers had been built to protect the town from the marauding French.

"Wish we could get inside and climb to the top of one of the towers," Penny said. "We could almost see the coast of France from there."

"You'll get nearly as good a view from the Gun Garden," Mrs Warrender suggested. Then, "What's the matter, Penny. You jumped."

"Did I? I thought I saw somebody or something move in the shadow of the tower. Did you, Jon?"

Her cousin shook his head. "Not me, and I'm not going over there either. Maybe it was the ghost of one of the many prisoners who used to languish behind those thick walls. And now, I'm talking like a guide book. Sorry!"

Penny glanced again into the shadows on the other side of the road and then followed the other two down a few steps into the Gun Garden. This was

now a pleasant little lawn with seats built on the very edge of the cliff and facing south with a wide view across to Dungeness and the coast. Here, from the time of Queen Elizabeth I, guns had pointed their blunt muzzles to the sea from which the enemy had so often come.

At the edge was a low brick wall, and here they sat and looked at the prospect before them. The view from the end of Trader's Street was fine, but this, in its way, was incomparable. Away to the right was Rye's sister town of Winchelsea on its little wooded hill, and they could plainly see the straight military road leading to it across the levels. Ahead of them the muddy river ran to find the sea a mile or more away at Rye Harbour. Nearer to them and curiously isolated between Rye and the bungalows of Winchelsea Beach was the squat ruin of Camber Castle, very familiar to Jon and Penny since the time it had played such an important part in the first adventure (*The Gay Dolphin Adventure*) they had shared with the Mortons.

The eastern shores of Rye Bay swung away to their left and Jon pointed to the flashing light of the lighthouse on the point of Dungeness.

"I read somewhere that the point of Dungeness grows farther out to sea each year. The shingle is always piling up."

"And somebody told me that it's a wonderful place for birds," Penny said as she slipped her hands into her jacket pockets.

"There are pools of fresh water somewhere in all that desert of shingle," Mrs Warrender added. "People in the hotel here told me so, and one or two have gone out with cameras and binoculars and sandwiches. That funny little Mr Green, for instance. He told me that he watches birds for hours over there."

"Seems odd to me," Jon said. "Part of Dungeness round Lydd was once used as a gunnery school, I'm sure. Fred told me last holidays that there are still large areas there that nobody can get near. I wouldn't mind going to have a look myself one day before we go to Dartmoor. Fred isn't a gossip but he knows everything that's going on round Rye, and he says he met a chap who told him that there's something very secret and mysterious going on between Lydd and the Ness. Electrified wire fences, he says, and the

only gate guarded by a sentry. Fierce guard-dogs patrol there too. I'd like to explore round there. Pity David isn't coming to us before we all meet on Dartmoor. He'd come with me like a shot."

"Maybe he would," Penny said briskly. "Maybe he's got the same sort of silly sense of humour as you. I should think it would be very funny to get electrocuted on a wire fence, shot at by a sentry and then attacked by a dog. Most amusing!"

"Now! Now!" Mrs Warrender laughed. "You're both being silly... Look! An owl."

Softly and silently a great owl, gleaming white under its wings, drifted above their heads.

"He's got something in his claws!" Penny whispered. "I've never seen an owl in Rye before. Reminds me of Shropshire and Witchend, Jon."

Her cousin nodded. He was not looking at the owl but, with one foot on the low wall, was staring out towards the fiat wastes between the lighthouse and the little town of Lydd some miles inland.

"Can you hear something peculiar?" he said quietly. "Listen, both of you. A high, thin noise. The sort of noise that some people can't hear. Or have I got a singing in the ears...? And look, Penny. There's a soft sort of light over there."

"Time you were in bed, Jonathan," his mother said. "There's not a soul about the streets of Rye but us, although Penny may have seen the ghost of a French prisoner by the tower. There's no light over Dungeness but that of the moon and no strange noise that I can hear."

"But there is," Penny whispered with her hand on Jon's sleeve. "I can hear it too. The air is full of it. It's everywhere! What is it, Jon?"

"It's something in the sky. *Look both of you!* Look! Are we crazy? Can you see it?"

Now there was a faint glow above the land. The whining noise increased until Mrs Warrender, who would never admit to being a little deaf, looked up in astonishment. The noise, as Penny had said, was everywhere. Then Jon drew in his breath sharply as he pointed with a shaking hand. Something - an almost indescribable object - was rising swiftly into the night sky. It was small, circular, almost flat underneath but with a sort of dome above. About it was a strange phosphorescence - a soft glow of rosy light - just enough for them to realize it was an object such as they had never seen before. As they watched with wildly beating hearts it tilted itself straight and shot up vertically into the sky at an unimaginable speed as the whining noise died away.

For some inexplicable reason, Penny felt a sob rise in her throat: this was something she did not understand and she hated and feared it. Mrs Warrender said nothing, staring at Jon, who suddenly sat on the low wall and covered his face with his hands.

"You *both* saw it, didn't you? You could swear that you saw it and heard it? Of course you could. It was real enough... You know what you've both been privileged to see, don't you? *That was a saucer... A flying saucer.* I was always sure they existed, and now I've seen one with my own eyes. *And you both saw it too.* You may have to swear to it. You could swear, couldn't you?"

Behind them somebody stifled a cough and Penny, to her shame, screamed. They turned just in time to see a man standing on the steps of the Gun Garden with a pair of big binoculars pointing up to the night sky. In the moonlight they could see that one of his hands was heavily bandaged.

Jon pulled his mother and Penny back into the shadows.

"But that's Mr Green from the Dolphin," Mrs Warrender whispered.

Jon remembered the sound of the closing door and the dim figure hurrying down the shadowed side of Trader's Street. Penny thought of the ghost of the French prisoner at the base of the Ypres Tower. Mrs Warrender was too bewildered to collect her thoughts, but when she looked down again at the

steps there was nobody there. The man with the binoculars and the bandaged hand had vanished without a sound.

3. The Second Saucer

A few days after Jon and Penny in Rye had seen a strange object flash across the midnight sky, a young man, who would have given anything to have been standing in the Gun Garden that night, was a traveller on one of the most remarkable railways in Britain. His name was Dan Sturt and he was eighteen. Two years ago his father had died suddenly and he learned that his mother would have to work to live. Mrs Sturt was a good cook and a good manager and she decided to open a cafe, and with her husband's small savings she bought a tea-shop called The Moorland Pixie in the little town of Princetown in the heart of Dartmoor. There seemed no other choice at that time and so, stunned and unhappy, the two moved south from the Midlands. Dan knew that there would now be no more school for him so, after a few weeks of helping his mother to settle in, he went off to Plymouth one day determined to find himself a job on one of the newspapers. Journalism was the career which he had set his heart on many years before. He did not manage it the first time, but he went back the following day and by persistence and enthusiasm he eventually saw a man who laughed at him a little - but not altogether unkindly - and took him on.

The next few months were very hard. He had to learn that nobody seemed to care whether he ever wrote a word or not! He was nothing more than an office boy. He was shouted at and sometimes cursed but at last he began to realize that he was becoming part of the machine. When another boy arrived, Dan was no longer the greenest junior. The news-editor grinned at him once as if he knew who he was, and several of the compositors in their glass-roofed room at the top of the building called him "Young Dan."

Then came the day when he was sent out with a woman reporter to "do" a wedding and learn how to get people's names right. Then a funeral. Then a visit by himself to the manager of the local theatre to verify some facts. Soon, although he was sure that he was being treated unfairly in never having a chance to show what he could really do, he knew that this was the life for him and that he would never change it. His greatest difficulty was the daily journey to and from Princetown, where he lived with his mother above the cafe. It was only possible because of the little single line railway

which ran from Princetown to Yelverton, where there was a connection for Plymouth only a few miles away.

And so, on this summer evening when we first meet Dan he is alone in a compartment in the little two-coach train starting its journey up to Princetown, the highest town in the country. Dan was used to this journey but he never tired of it. Once he had hated the Moor, and the severity of their first winter at Princetown in the shadow of the great, grim prison buildings had been rather shattering. For six weeks they had been enveloped in fog; and then the Moor had been white with snow while Plymouth was in sunshine. But in spring they forgot the discomforts of the winter; as the days lengthened, more and more tourists passed through Princetown and business was good at The Moorland Pixie. Now, this fine summer, they were busier than they had ever been. Almost every coach which crossed the Moor stopped in the little town's wide street and gave its passengers an hour in which to gape at the prison gates and the Dartmoor ponies who waited in the streets for titbits.

It was a grand evening but pleasantly cool as the sturdy engine climbed higher and higher into the heart of the Moor. Dan watched the familiar landmarks from the window, then sat back and thought about his day's work.

There had not been much of it except two weddings, which he detested. Mr Adams, the news editor, had been reasonably decent to him on the two occasions on which he had gone into his office. He liked his boss now and knew that he was respected throughout the office. If he could only do something really worthwhile - get, somehow or other, a real, exclusive story - surely *that* would make Mr Adams realize that, right under his nose, was a reporter whose name one day would be known on both sides of the Atlantic?

The train was up the hill now and running into Princetown's little station. Some children who went to school in Plymouth got out, together with the wives of some of the prison staff. Dan smiled, waved to George the engine driver and hurried out. It was a grand evening. On his left was North Hessary Tor, on the summit of which towered a sixteen hundred feet TV mast, while the purple slopes of Tor Royal guarded the west.

The main street of Princetown, in which stood The Moorland Pixie, was wide and wind-swept. As usual, during the summer, several coaches were parked there and half a dozen brown, shaggy moorland ponies stood together with flies buzzing round their heads while tourists fed them with bread and buns.

Dan ran across the road and pushed back the door of the cafe. Several tables were occupied and his mother, who was serving at one of them, smiled at him as he went through to the kitchen. The cafe was small enough for Mrs Sturt to manage single-handed except at the height of the season, but she always closed at half-past seven and it was nearly that now. He went upstairs to wash and change and by the time he was down again the last customers were paying their bills.

"Well, Mum," he said as he locked the door. "Had a good day? Sit down now and I'll clear the tables and make the tea."

Mrs Sturt smiled at him affectionately. She was a dark-haired, dark-eyed, fresh-faced little woman who was facing her new responsibilities and anxieties with great courage. There had been times when she had been near despair at The Moorland Pixie, but she was winning through now. Many of her customers in the season came from her own midland country and recognized her accent as soon as she spoke to them, and it was not long before her scones and cakes had won the reputation they deserved in the little town itself.

"A good day, son. I'll add up later. There's two plates of ham and tongue in the 'fridge and a salad. I didn't think you'd want any chips to-night for it's been hot even up here today. My feet ache, Dan. Come and tell me what you've been doing."

They both enjoyed the half-hour they spent together after the cafe closed. Mrs Sturt never tried to keep him in for the rest of the evening because she knew how much he enjoyed going out on his bike and watching for his birds and exploring the Moor which, incidentally, she hated. She did not really understand much about the newspaper business but always listened attentively, wondering why her boy should be so certain about journalism as a career. But she was sympathetic and shrewd and a good listener, and the

consequence was that Dan not only loved and admired her but treated her as a friend.

He brought the meal and teapot and for ten minutes neither of them said much. Then Dan fetched himself an ice.

"I been thinking, Mum. They'll never take much notice of me on the paper or know what I can really do unless I can find them a story... You remember I told you what a story is? It's not something you make up like in a book but it's something that happens. Something true. Something that's the sort of news that Mr Adams has just got to print. Most important of all it's got to be news that we get first and that nobody else has got. Do you see what I mean, Mum?"

Mrs Sturt smiled at him.

"It doesn't seem as important to me as it does to you, son. I don't read the papers much except yours that you bring home. Sometimes I hear bits o' gossip about the prison and to-day I heard something from Mrs Roberts in the Post Office, but I shouldn't think it's any good for the paper."

"What is it, Mum? You just tell me everything you hear. We're the chaps to know what's news! I don't reckon Mr Adams would want gossip about the prison, but if there was an escape I'd want to be the first to know up here. If there was ever an escape while I'm at the office, you'd 'phone me at once wouldn't you, Mum! It'd be vital. What did you hear from that Mrs Roberts? Can't stand that woman. She's nosy."

"You're a bit curious yourself, Dan, and Mrs Roberts has a kind heart... She was telling me about a big house just off the road beyond Two Bridges. She said this has been empty for a while, but now it's been let furnished-----"

"She must mean King's Holt. I know that place. Didn't I tell you I'd found an owl's nest there? It's a big house. Lot of stables and old sheds at the back. There's a rough drive leads up to the house from the road and it's the loneliest place I've ever seen... I was watching the owls one evening and saw 'em go down behind the house so I biked up the drive and found the

place empty. It's not ruined or anything like that. Who'd want to live there, I wonder?"

"Mrs Roberts didn't know but thought it was people who had been abroad... It's not so long ago, Dan, that those old ladies lived there... I've forgotten their names but maybe there's what you call a story there. Why should three old dears want to live in that awful place?"

"It's not awful, Mum. It's lonely, I suppose, but there are some people who like the Moor. I wouldn't mind living there in the spring and summer. The river isn't very far away if you were keen on fishing. Maybe the people who are coming are just on holiday."

Mrs Sturt poured herself out another cup of tea and smiled. "Maybe they are, Dan. Maybe they're something else? Just as well you've got your old mother to help you along with your stories."

"What do you mean, Mum?"

Mrs Sturt put down her cup.

"You know as well as I do, Dan, that there's some secret place atop of the Moor. Folk round here all know it but they don't talk about it."

"That's true enough. It's something to do with atomic stuff, I b'lieve. I asked a chap in the office and he said we'd never be allowed to mention it. I thought I'd told you about it before."

"You did son. I'm just trying to help you. Seems to me that if a lot of crazy scientists are shut up in that place then there's something interesting going on. Do you know where it is?"

"Somewhere high above the source of the Swincombe. There's some bad bogs up there you know and a reservoir too. I've never been up as far but I s'pose I could get there and back in a day. I've been told that it's surrounded by a wire fence and guarded but they might have been pulling my leg. Shouldn't think so, though."

"Well, don't get yourself into trouble, Dan, but although it doesn't matter to me what's going on up there, it seems funny that we never see any of the men who work there... If there is anybody there, that is."

"That's something, Mum! If there are people there how do they live? What do they eat? How do they get their food? P'raps that chap in the office meant that the Government have asked all the newspapers to keep quiet about it. Top secret!"

"That's it, Dan. Top secret... But just suppose that you saw something happening up there that nobody else knew anything about? I s'pose that precious Mr Adams of yours wouldn't mind being told, would he? Even if he didn't print it all in his paper, he'd know that you found out and told him, wouldn't he?"

Dan took the tray from her and led the way into the kitchen.

"You're right, Mum. You get all the bright ideas in this family, don't you? Maybe I'll have a look round there on Sunday. Thanks very much. I'll wash up and then if you don't mind I'll slip down to King's Holt on my bike and have a look at those owls. You go upstairs and put your feet up and read the best paper in the west of England."

When he went upstairs to their living-room ten minutes later his mother was asleep with her glasses on the end of her nose and the paper on the floor. She woke with a start just as he was tip-toeing to the door

"I thought of something else, Dan, just before I dropped off. Do you think those people coming to live at King's Holt might have something to do with the secret place?"

"Secret station, I call it, Mum. Call it to myself I mean. Top secret station. Maybe it's just a name like XA6? I can't see why the new people should have anything to do with it, though? It would be so difficult for them to get up there. I'm sure the only way is by a track by the river up as far as the reservoir. You get to it by Hexworthy. I've been up as far as that. I s'pose I could find out whether any lorries or vans use that track. There must be

somebody in Hexworthy who would know... But maybe nobody would tell me."

"Don't be too late, son, and if you are don't make a noise when you come in. Who'd have thought that I should ever be telling you to go out exploring secret stations and the like. I don't know what's come over me. Truth to tell, I'm not going to have my boy's work overlooked by those people down in Plymouth... Don't you fret, Dan. You'll show them yet."

He put his arm round her shoulders affectionately - something he rarely did. "I'll show them, Mum, and thanks for everything. I'll try not to be too late but the moon will be up tonight and I want some fresh air. Cheerio."

He fetched his bicycle from the shed behind the cafe. The coaches and the ponies had gone. The wide street, except for three cars parked outside the hotel was empty. He turned at the end of the street and rushed down the hill towards Two Bridges. Away on his left was the hideous grey bulk of the prison, and in a few seconds the little town was left behind. Beyond the stone walls on each side of the road the Moor - purple, brown and green - rolled away into the distance. The sun was going down behind him, and far away on the other side of the main road were the rock-covered summits of Believer Tor and Laughter Tor. At the bottom of the hill he turned to the right on to the Tavistock-Ashburton road and, stopping for a while on the old bridge over the Dart, by the big hotel, he watched the water fretting over the smooth pebbles and listened to its gentle song.

Ever since he had come to the Moor, Dan had been fascinated by its running water. He soon understood why some people claimed that the Dart was the loveliest river in Britain, but it was the other lesser known tributaries and streams that had such an appeal for him. He had been out, many times, on the Moor when the only sound was the muted song of running water. He had climbed to some of those treacherous and bright green patches of moss which were softer than a filled sponge and yet the source of many a fast running stream. The Moor was alive with water and one of the most exciting of its rivers was the Swincombe, which ran into the Dart not far from Hexworthy, and above the source of which was built the Secret Station which might yet give him the story he wanted.

He thought affectionately of his mother as the sun slipped down out of sight beyond the purple hill-tops. She was very good to him, but he did sometimes wish that he had found somebody in Princetown as keen as he was on exploring and watching birds and following streams up to their source. He hoisted himself to the stone parapet of the bridge and watched the cars on the main road a hundred yards away. The light from the setting sun glowed for a few moments on the summit of Believer and suddenly an owl drifted over from the direction of a few trees behind the hotel and this reminded him that his friends at King's Holt would soon be busy hunting for their family. He got on to his bicycle again and rode slowly east towards Hexworthy and Dart Meet.

The road to Chagford and Moretonhampstead branched off to the left but he kept straight on as the light faded. In the shadows just off the road the dim shapes of moorland ponies cropped the verges, and by the time he reached the entrance to King's Holt the first stars were pin-pointing the darkening sky. The house was about a quarter of a mile from the road and a screen of pine trees had been planted to shield it from the north and east. Once a gate had guarded the drive but only the rotting posts now remained, on one of which was nailed a grubby notice with the word PRIVATE. The drive, which at some time had been gravelled, was now pitted with holes and ruts and Dan cycled down it cautiously. The evening breeze was stirring the heads of the dark pines, and as he zig-zagged past the potholes he wondered again whether the people who had taken the house had anything to do with the Secret Station. King's Holt was undoubtedly the sort of house which ought to harbour a mystery. Perhaps it did? Perhaps it was going to? Perhaps, if he was as intelligent as his mother believed him to be, he would be able to solve it?

Then his bicycle crashed into a hole and threw him. He was very angry when he picked himself up, and thought again that anyone who rented this place would have to be fond of solitude.

King's Holt was built of the grey granite of the moor with a pillared porch in the centre facing the drive. Brown paint was peeling from the front door and the closed windows stared like lidded eyes at the spinney of whispering pines. Grass was growing in what once must have been a well-kept drive

and swallows were busy about their nests under the gutters. Not all the windows were shuttered and Dan could see furniture in one of the big rooms downstairs. It had two stories and two wings like the upper and lower strokes of a short letter E jutting out of the back. Dan wondered, as he had before, why three old ladies had chosen to live in this lonely place with its stables and out-houses and why anyone should wish to live in it now. It was certainly not very inviting.

The owls' nest was in the loft over the stables, so he wheeled his bicycle round to the back. Here there was a square, brick-paved yard bounded by the back and two wings of the house on three sides and by stables on the other. Another row of pine trees had been planted as a wind-break beyond these out-buildings. There was no garden at King's Holt, for the Moor swept greedily down to a wire fence a few yards behind the out-houses.

Dan leaned his bicycle against the back door and gazed up at the hole in the boarding of the loft. The stable doors were locked, so Dan had never seen the owls' nest; but it was through this hole that the owls came and went on their hunting expeditions. He looked round in the dusk, hoping to find a place, from which he could watch undisturbed, and eventually settled down at a corner of the house behind a water butt and pulled a notebook from his pocket. If the owls were really hunting it might be interesting to keep a careful record of how long each of them was away from the nest. As he settled down with his back to the wall the words of an article he might write on the habits of Barn Owls began to form in his head.

He stared up at the sky above the stable roof. The summer night was slipping silently over the Moor. The sky was like a curtain of blue velvet pierced for a myriad of stars to show their cold light, and then, even as he watched, the old tiled roof gleamed with silver as the moon came up.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a hideous snoring and after the first shock Dan grinned to himself in the shadow of the water butt. He remembered reading of the extraordinary noises young owls sometimes made at night. Then he saw the first bird squeezing out of the hole. There was a scrabbling sound as his claws scraped against the wood; then he spread his great wings and floated away silently. A minute later his mate followed and Dan caught a glimpse of the cruel, curved beak and sharp

talons. Then, as she turned in the moonlight only a few feet above him, he saw the creamy under part of wings and body. In six minutes the big chap was back again with what looked like a young rat in his talons. His mate was just behind him with a mouse in her beak and so, for the next half-hour, the two hunted for their hungry, snorting youngsters.

The night was warm and although Dan was fascinated by the careful record he was keeping, he dozed off for a few minutes. Suddenly he was aware of the smell of cigarette smoke and with a sudden shock he saw, in the shadows, a man standing by his bicycle which he had left by the back door. Dan was not really doing anything wrong in being here and he certainly did not feel guilty, but something warned him to stay quietly in his hiding place. The stranger moved away a few paces, looked up at the empty house and then flicked away the smouldering end of his cigarette. Dan's heart thumped with excitement as the man stood still in the shadows for a long, long minute.

Was he a thief? Was he a bird-watcher like himself? Was he alone? Dan crouched back against the water butt hoping that he would not be seen. Overhead the owl cried and the man looked up and crossed the yard. He kept out of the moonlight and Dan could not see him clearly, but he was small and wearing a curiously shaped tweed hat. Some sort of a case was slung by a long strap over his shoulder and Dan guessed this to contain binoculars. He did not look back and in a few seconds was out of sight.

Dan, feeling suddenly very wide awake, got up and stretched. There was no doubt that this mysterious stranger ought to be followed: here, perhaps, was the story he had been waiting for. He left his bicycle where it was because he dare not take the time to hide it, and ran across the yard and down the side of the stables. The decrepit old gate in the wire fence was open and from there a rough track led down to the bank of the River Dart. On the other side of the river rose Swincombe Tor; to the left, perhaps half a mile or more away, the Swincombe Brook joined the Dart. The only way of reaching the other bank of the Dart was by stepping stones when the water was low.

Dan's shoes were rubber soled, so he made no sound as he hurried down the track. He dared not get too close to the stranger; but the man must have

been moving fast because he was already crossing the river when Dan came in sight of it. He crouched behind a clump of bracken, and it was as well that he did, because the man stopped and looked back as soon as he was on the other side. But even then Dan could not see his face and as he lay, pressed to the ground, he wondered whether the stranger would turn left along the Dart and then climb the long valley of the Swincombe up to the Secret Station. But the opposite bank was in shadow and it was very difficult to see when the man moved. At last he lit another cigarette and, apparently satisfied that he was not being followed, made off into the darkness.

Dan waited a few more minutes and then rushed at the stepping stones. He missed his footing on one and to his fury fell flat on his face in the water, which was surprisingly cold. Then, when at last he was over, he realized that he had no idea in which direction the man had gone. If he had followed the track along the bank towards the Swincombe, there would be a better chance of catching him than if he climbed up the Tor. Dan took a risk and turned left. He stopped and listened at each turn of the path but there was no sound but that of running water. There was no smell of tobacco either, and the farther he went the more sure he was that he had made the wrong choice. He went on to the junction of the two rivers and looked up the valley to the distant heights in the heart of the Moor; he had moved fast and felt sure that he would have caught the stranger if he had come this way.

For a moment he wondered whether it would be worth struggling up the Swincombe valley but decided not to do so. Perhaps if he went back quickly to the stepping stones he might see the man again, although it was now more likely that he had climbed up towards Swincombe Tor. There seemed no object for the stranger to do this except that the view of the Moor in moonlight would be marvellous; but why should he be poking round King's Holt at night and then waiting to see if he was being followed?

Dan shrugged his shoulders and turned back the way he had come. He was furious with himself for missing such a chance but perhaps he had the germ of a story already. Instead of crossing the river when he reached the stepping stones, he followed a narrow track which led across the heather towards the Tor. The side of it was in deep shadow, although the pile of flat

rocks on the summit was caught in the moonlight. He decided to go forward a little way and see whether the path would lead him round the Tor or up to its summit. If he neither saw nor heard anything after five minutes he would go back for his bike and get home as quickly as he could.

As he stepped forward he realized that although the bulk of Swincombe Tor was on his right he could see, against the skyline, the rolling moorland three miles or more away where the Secret Station must be. At the same moment it occurred to him that from the top of the Tor here he would be almost on the same level, with a clear view across the moorland to it.

He stopped and at that moment became aware of a curious thin whining sound. *Thin* was the word. It was not a whistle, just a faint insistent challenge in his ears. He had never heard anything like it before and he looked round in bewilderment. Then, above the distant hilltops he saw a rosy tint and suddenly a thin, circular shape glowing with the same colour shot into the night sky. From where he was, it looked no larger than a penny; but it was real enough. The whining sound intensified and sang against his eardrums as the little disc-like object passed like a meteor, tilted and then shot upwards into the void and disappeared.

Dan felt the colour draining from his face. He had his story at last! As he turned to race back to King's Holt and his bicycle he looked at the Tor. On the rocks on the summit was the tiny figure of a man standing like a statue with his face turned towards the stars.

4. Journey West

Penny was wide awake. Sleep vanished like the flicking up of a blind. She sat up in bed and pushed back her hair with one hand and felt under her pillow for her watch - the loveliest and most exciting present she had ever had.

A quarter past five! Then she remembered that today she was really going to King's Holt with her father and mother and Jon in their new car, and meeting David, Peter and the twins in Exeter. They planned to leave Rye at seven, so there was no real need to get up for another hour. Another hour in bed would be wonderful, but it was maddening to be so excited that she was wide awake. It would be fun to make tea and take it up to her father and mother; but six o'clock would be early enough for that. She settled down again, pulled the bedclothes up to her chin, closed her eyes and remembered all the wonderful things that had happened to her in the past few days.

Nothing had been the same from the moment when, with Aunt Margaret, she had waited with wildly beating heart at London Airport. She had seen a slight, grey-eyed woman with hair the colour of her own hurrying towards her, and realized that it was her mother. She was not only like the photographs, but like the memory Penny had been holding for so long. Then she was being hugged by her father - tall, lean, tanned and with grey hair, although she was sure that when he went away his hair was black.

Outside the airport was a big, hired car. They had had lunch in a restaurant in London but Penny had no idea what she was eating. At first none of them had much to say, but when they had finished the meal her father had put his hand in his pocket and passed her a little flat package wrapped in tissue paper.

"Celebration home-again present, Penelope," he had smiled. "Your mother was sure you would like it. Wear it now."

It was the watch. Not a schoolgirl's watch but a little gold beauty with a tiny, gleaming face on a thin, thin strap. A watch to wear for ever and ever.

Her mother fixed it on her wrist while she bent her head so that they should not see the tears in her eyes. After that it was easier. The car was waiting and drove them down through Kent into Sussex to Rye and the Dolphin. That first evening she and Jon had taken them out to see the town. The next day they had unpacked and lazed and gossiped. The next they had gone to London and while her father collected the new car, Penny and her mother had gone off to buy exciting clothes and look at the sights. The following day they tried the car, exploring Sussex from Chichester to the Downs and Brighton.

All this time they had been getting to know each other, until now, as she lay in bed waiting for six o'clock, Penny wondered what she had been worrying about. And in just over an hour they would be on their way to what she hoped would be the most exciting holiday of her life.

She sat up again. The early mist was thinning and before long the sun would be shining. Then she jumped out of bed, pulled on her dressing gown and went quietly down her little winding stairs to the next landing. She knew that nobody would be in the kitchen at this hour, so she tiptoed along the carpeted corridor of the hotel until she reached the wide stairs leading down into the lounge. Sitting at one of the writing desks with his back to her and his head bent over papers or a book was Jon. He was absorbed in whatever he was doing.

Penny paused and then giggled.

"What's the matter with you, Jon? What are you doing? Couldn't you sleep either?"

He turned and regarded her gravely.

"No, I couldn't. Got something on my mind about the route I worked out with your father yesterday. I remembered there was an A.A. book in here and now I've settled it. What are you doing? Sleep-walking?"

"I was going to make some tea for Mother and Dad. Let's take your mother some, too. Come and help me."

He nodded, and strolled over to wait for her at the foot of the stairs.

"Everything all right, Penny?" he asked abruptly. "Don't seem to have had a chance to ask you properly."

She stopped on the bottom stair and their eyes were about level.

"Of course, Jon. Everything is wonderful and thanks for asking." Then her mood changed and in the kitchen she began to tease him about his maps.

"I can't think why we don't just follow the signposts all the way instead of working everything out beforehand. Surely it's much more fun just to go sort of zig-zag and haphazard?"

"Your father and mother want to see as many different parts of the South Country as they can, and as we've got to be at Exeter at half-past three to meet David and the twins and then wait for Peter to arrive from Hereford, I've got to work it out. Anyway I like working it out."

She did not answer until she had laid two trays and then said, "This is going to be fun, Jon... There's something I want to ask you although I don't seem to have had the chance... Jon. D'you think the others will like my parents? You like them, don't you?"

"They'd better like them, Penny! I s'pose you know how lucky you are."

Penny nodded. "I do. I just wondered what other people thought. Thanks."

"Something else I wanted to say," Jon went on. "I s'pose you've forgotten that flying saucer we saw over Dungeness? I s'pose you know you saw one of the most vital sights of the century?"

She laughed. Then, "Sorry, Jon. That sounded rather pompous."

"Don't be an idiot, Penny. You're giggling at something you don't understand. There are flying saucers and there are people who have seen and photographed them. We saw one that night - or something like a flying saucer - and I want you and my mother to sign a statement I've written out confirming what we saw. Do you remember it, Penny?"

"I *think* so. It was small and pink and it whizzed and made a noise like very, very young mosquitoes do when they're hunting for somebody's blood."

He shuddered at her description of a scientific marvel which might, quite literally, be out of this world.

"I sent a notice of what we'd seen up to three papers but none of them printed a word. I'm going to send a report now to the Interplanetary Society and I want you and my mother to sign it. Will you, Penny?"

She realized that he was serious and it would be terrible to tell him that she had been too excited to think much about what they had seen that night, although it had scared her at the time. But if Jon wanted her to sign a paper about what they had seen - and the memory of it was hazy now - she most certainly would.

" 'Course I will, Jon. Sorry I laughed. I don't suppose that I shall understand, but you must try and tell me some time just why they are important. Have you asked your mother, too...? *Look out!* The kettle's boiling."

"All right. I'll make the tea... Yes. I did ask Mother but I don't think she's very keen on associating the Dolphin with saucers. Seems to think people won't be keen to come to Rye if saucers are on view down here."

"Oh!" Penny said thoughtfully. "I see. That makes it more difficult. But if the papers haven't printed anything I s'pose that Society you mentioned would only keep your report as a record, wouldn't they?... There's another thing, Jon. I've just thought of it. We never found out whether that man watching from the Gun Garden was really that Mr Green, did we?"

"Mother was sure. Said he had a bandaged hand, but it's true that he was back in the hotel before we were. You remember she wouldn't let us follow him and said he had as much right to be out there watching flying saucers as we had?"

"So he had," Penny said as she put the lids on the two tea-pots which Jon had filled. "He went next morning, didn't he? We should have asked Fred

about him."

"I did." Jon smiled. "He went off in his little car directly after breakfast and didn't seem himself at all, Fred said. Fred said that once he thought he was a nice gentleman but something seemed to have bit him at the end. Almost like he'd had some bad news, Fred said."

Penny laughed and then put her hand over her mouth. "Sorry!" she whispered. "I forgot that nobody else is up. You go and have a cup with your mother and I'll have mine with the parents. Won't they be glad to see me! I say, Jon. Did you tell Fred about the saucer?"

"Yes, I did. He just looked at me as if I was mad and said, 'Did you now? Fancy that! And did you note that nice bit of bowling by somebody or other of Sussex yesterday?' "

"But you have to listen to Fred on cricket just like I have to listen to you on saucers, Jonathan dear," she said wickedly as she took her parents' tray. "Did he tell you any more about the mysterious Mr Green? I'm sure he knows everything there is to know about the hotel guests."

Jon opened the service door with his shoulder and followed her through into the lounge.

"If you're really interested," he whispered, "I did find out something. Mr Green, who seemed to have made up his mind to leave in a hurry, burned a lot of papers in the fireplace in his room and then stirred up all the ashes... Never mind how I know, but I do."

She turned on the bottom stair and looked at him wide-eyed. "A mysterious man, Jonathan. And you've not told me until now."

"Didn't want to bother you," he said shortly. "You've got other things to think of."

This was very true, but Penny realized that he would have liked to have told her before. So she just smiled and said, "Don't let's be late starting, Jon. We must keep to schedule."

They left the Dolphin at ten to eight and Jon had a struggle to get them off then. Fred had polished the new car so that you could see your face in it and stowed the luggage in the boot while they were having breakfast, but Penny was hopping about the yard with excitement while the two Mrs Warrenders seemed to find it impossible to part.

"I only hope you're going to be reasonably comfortable," Jon's mother said. "And I hope too that you're going to get some sort of domestic help."

"The agent promised to get us somebody," Mr Warrender said as he lit his pipe. "But even if there's nobody, we shall manage, shan't we, Penelope?"

Penny nodded dismally. She did not want to disappoint her father, but household chores in a large, old house were not her idea of a good holiday. She was quite sure that her father had no idea how difficult it might be.

Then they all got into the car and waved goodbye to Mrs Warrender and Fred as they moved out into Trader's Street.

Jon had planned his route very carefully, doing his best to make sure that his uncle and aunt would see as much varied country as possible, although the shortest route would have been along the coast.

Before the mist over the levels had dissolved, they had climbed Winchelsea hill and were on the way to Hastings. There Jon took them inland to Battle and then to Uckfield. And so they travelled fast north-west across Sussex to Horsham.

"We get into Surrey soon," Jon explained over his shoulder to his aunt. "I wanted specially for you to see the cathedral at Guildford. That's as far north as we go."

"What about going up to John O'Groats?" Penny suggested cheerfully. "Maybe we ought to have brought our skates?"

Soon after they came to Guildford with its steep cobbled High Street and old Guildhall and the cathedral of warm, red brick crowning a hill on the

outskirts of the town. Then up to the famous straight road known as the Hog's Back and down to Farnham where they stopped for coffee.

"You haven't told me much about these Mortons that we're meeting in Exeter, Penelope," Mr Warrender said suddenly. "Besides David, who is about your age, there are twins and a dog, I understand?"

"But I have told you about them lots of times in letters, Dad. David is grand - much, much better looking and more alert than Jonathan - but I must warn you that you must try and be brave about the twins. Not all grown-ups care for them at first. They're rather unique, aren't they, Jon?"

"Luckily they are," Jon said feelingly. "It would be terrible if there was another set like them anywhere."

"They sound delightful," Mrs Warrender said vaguely.

"They are a bit cheeky, Mum, but I'm sure you'll love them. Whatever Jon says, he's really proud of them. They're very brave and loyal."

"And a dog? A Scotch terrier I believe you said, Penelope?"

"Yes, Dad. He's called Macbeth, because when he was a young puppy he barked at night. Mr Morton said he murdered sleep and gave him that name. You'll like him very much - if he likes you. I know you love dogs."

"Indeed I do, my dear. I'm thinking of buying one."

"I see. I think p'raps it would be better if you didn't do that until Mackie has gone home again. He doesn't take very kindly to other dogs. He's rather possessive, acksherley, as Mary would say. He adores Mary."

"And what about the other girl? The girl you call Peter?" Mrs Warrender said.

"There's nobody like Peter," Penny said quickly. "She's grand! She's the bravest and most wonderful girl I know. She doesn't say much and I s'pose she's a bit shy."

"Like you," Jon interrupted. "Ha! Ha!"

"Like me," Penny went on to her mother. "Anyway, I wish I looked just half as nice as she does. She hasn't got a mother so you'll have to make a fuss of her."

"It looks as if I'm going to have a very large family at King's Holt," Mrs Warrender smiled. "We warned you that you may have to look after yourselves, didn't we? Your father and I are going off on a second honeymoon if it suits us."

Then Jon suggested that they ought to be on their way and they went out into the sunshine. After half an hour in Winchester they went through the New Forest, stopping for a few minutes to see the Rufus Stone - which was not a stone but a triangular slab of iron. They missed Bournemouth and had a late lunch in lovely Dorchester. As they crossed Dorset they tried to guess what King's Holt would really be like and Mr Warrender made them laugh by telling them about some of the houses which had been offered to him. Axminster next, with the rolling hills of Devon on the horizon, a crawl through the long street of Honiton and then Exeter at last.

They parked outside the cathedral, and as Mr Warrender, tired and stiff, got out he said to Penny, "You two go off and meet your friends. Your mother and I are going to have tea and then look at the cathedral. We'll meet you at the car in an hour's time."

So Jon and Penny went off together with the latter trotting every now and then to keep up with him.

"Long-legged and selfish beast," she panted as he waited for her at a pedestrian crossing. "Do we have to dash about like this? Even if the London train is in they'll wait for us at the barrier."

He grabbed her arm and strode across the road.

"Only thing we don't know is when Peter is arriving," he said. "David will have fixed it of course, but I s'pose he knows that we can't take them all in the car... Here's the way to the station. Good!"

Penny liked railway stations and Jon still had a passion for trains, so neither of them was bored when they found they had ten minutes to wait. Penny tried to get a free read at the bookstall and was eventually forced to give up the attempt when the man in charge offered to come round and turn over the pages for her. Jon, who was studying a timetable nearby, overheard this remark and was very amused. Before she could reply to his taunts the train came in and they rushed to the barrier.

"David will take his time," Penny said. "And the twins won't wait for him."

She was right. Fifty or sixty people hurried out, and then she noticed that some of those at the back of the crowd were looking over their shoulders with some amusement.

And so the Morton twins entered the West Country. Between them they were carrying a canvas holdall - a handle each. In Mary's other hand was the end of a scarlet lead at the end of which was a black, shaggy Scottie wearing a look of extreme dejection and a tartan collar. His tail drooped and his tongue lolled. He detested crowds and hated all railway stations.

Richard, in his free hand, was carrying a paper bag and a straight staff made of ash as tall as himself with a "V" at the top - the sort of pole known as a "thumbstick". They did not seem to be looking anxiously for anybody to meet them, nor for their brother, who was probably farther down the platform. They seemed indeed to be gravely preoccupied. As they neared the barrier Penny noticed that their railway tickets were being held firmly between their teeth.

"Act One!" Penny heard Jon murmur. "You look after them, Pen. I'll go and find David," and showing his platform ticket to one of the two collectors, he slipped on to the platform just as the twins arrived. Mary extended her face forwards and upwards and nodded encouragingly at the other astonished official.

"She wants you to take the tickets," Penny laughed. "Hello, you twins! How are you?"

Dickie flashed a look at her and then offered his ticket in the same way. The ticket collector pushed his spectacles up his nose, looked at them both carefully and said to nobody in particular, "I don't believe it," and then took the damp and proffered tickets.

"Good afternoon," Mary said politely as she licked her lips. "Thank you very much. One of the tickets is for our dog."

"Thank you for a very pleasant journey," Dickie added gravely, and then with the smile which had always stood him in good stead he greeted Penny. "Hi, Penny! Dartmoor, here we come! Where are your new father and mother?"

Then Mary dropped her side of the holdall, picked up the squirming Mackie and allowed him to lick Penny's nose.

"The little darling remembers you, Penny. Of course he does. Isn't he wonderful? What have you done with Jon or has he let you come by yourself? He doesn't like us much."

"Nonsense!" Penny laughed as she hugged her. "He went down the platform to meet David. He's here, isn't he?"

"Oh yes," Dickie agreed. "He's got a very big suitcase somewhere and he acksherley forced us to carry this enormous luggage by ourselves. He's a brute, Penny. He's worse than ever. Orderin' us about an'-----"

"An' tearing our arms out of their sockets," Mary added brightly. "Here they are. They've forgotten all about us."

Then David caught sight of Penny and gave her a welcoming grin. And in the few seconds that it took for the two boys to reach them, Penny had a nice, warm and excited feeling as she realized how lucky she was to have her father and mother again and her splendid friends as well. David Morton was three inches shorter than Jon and much better looking.

"Grand to see you, Penny," he smiled. "Thanks for this wonderful invitation. Bit of luck for us as we weren't going to Witchend until next

month... Peter's due at the other station in about half an hour. I'm going to wait for her if you don't mind. We knew there wouldn't be room in your father's car, but Dad's given us some cash and we've planned to go by bus to Ashburton and then we can arrange to pick up two bicycles from there if there are any for hire. If you could take this case and the twins and Mackie we can manage. Will your father mind?"

"Of course not. Leave the luggage here and Dad will bring the car to pick it up. They're waiting for us at the cathedral. Let's go."

Meanwhile Jon had been greeting the twins and Macbeth.

"What's that stick for, Dickie?"

"Walking," the little boy said tersely.

"Over the moor with," Mary added.

"Oh, good! Jolly fine idea," Jon went on. "How are you both?"

"Acksherley," Mary said gravely, "we aren't well. We've been sick."

"Surely you don't do that together?" Jon gasped. "I don't believe it... David! Are these kids all right? Mary's looking big-eyed at me and says *they've* been ill."

"They've both eaten more odd snacks than is good for them on the train. Mary weakened first and retired for a while. Personally I think Dickie could eat a bag of nails without any ill effects... Greedy little pigs! Don't take any notice."

They walked back to the cathedral, where Mr and Mrs Warrender were waiting by the car.

Mary ran forward to meet the latter and said exactly the right thing. "You're just erzackly like Penny and thank you very much for asking us. This is my brother Richard. We're twins."

Mrs Warrender gave them one shrewd look, capitulated and gave them a hand each.

"Penny has told me lots about you... How are you, David? Thank you for coming to help us fill up King's Holt."

Meanwhile Mackie pulled his lead free from Mary and after a preliminary sniff jumped up at Mr Warrender as if he was his oldest friend. Mr Warrender was duly flattered, for Mackie in this mood was as difficult to resist as the twins and just as discriminating.

Mrs Warrender then offered them tea and Jon was amused to notice that Mary blushed a little although Dickie looked interested. Eventually they decided to get on as quickly as they could and drove to the station. With the extra luggage stowed in the boot they all waved "Goodbye" to David after Jon had showed him King's Holt on the map.

Soon, as they sped westwards, they saw the great purple hills of the Moor ahead of them. They were through the narrow streets of Ashburton almost before they realized it and suddenly, on the left of the road, saw the lovely River Dart for the first time. They crossed the river soon afterwards by the narrow Holne Bridge, and began to climb. The wooded valley was left behind and as the road twisted and turned upwards they realized that they were on the Moor at last. Suddenly the road dropped sharply. Below them, spread out like a picture, was a steep-sided valley. Far, far below them the road, like a twisted white ribbon, crossed a river by a bridge and then climbed up the other side of the hill.

"That's Dart Meet," Jon explained. "The East and West Dart meet at the other side of the bridge. See the two rivers?... And look at the cars."

To the right of the bridge by the side of the river many cars were parked, and a long line was crawling up the steep hill. Jon reminded them that this was the only road crossing the Moor from east to west. At the top of the hill on the other side of the river they saw a road to the left signposted HEXWORTHY, and then there was nothing but moorland and the lonely tors.

"Only about three miles now," Jon said as he folded up the map.

Mackie, on Mary's lap, barked with excitement and shortly afterwards Jon pointed to a dark clump of fir trees about a quarter of a mile off the road to the left.

"I bet that's it! Looks lonely enough even for us."

He was right. There was no gate between the posts at the drive entrance and no notice except the word PRIVATE on a board. The drive itself was very rough, but their first surprise when the car stopped in front of the house was that smoke was coming from one of the chimneys. The second was that the front door was open and that in the porch was standing a man in a white jacket.

As the car stopped he stepped forward and opened the door.

"Mr Warrender? Name of Donaldson, sir. Sent to you by the agents," and he passed over a sealed envelope and smiled at them all.

The twins and Mackie tumbled out and Donaldson stared at the former as if he had seen a ghost.

"Are you staying here and helping us have a holiday?" Mary asked and then grabbed Mackie who was growling and bristling round the stranger's shiny black shoes. Donaldson looked down at the little dog and with another smile he bent and patted him. To the twin's surprise Mackie wagged his tail. Then Mr Warrender put the letter in his pocket.

"They give you a fine reference, Donaldson. Been in the navy, eh?"

The man nodded and smiled at Mrs Warrender.

"I'll do my best to please you. Plain cooking I can do. They gave me a key so I've tidied up a bit and lit the kitchen fire. The stores have been delivered from Princetown. The telephone is working and I put some of the bedding in the kitchen to air..."

"Everything sounds wonderful, Donaldson, thank you," Mrs Warrender said. She was rather dazed by the turn of events and could hardly believe their luck in getting an ex-sailor to look after them. "I think we'd better introduce you to the rest of us. There are two more to come later."

"The garage is at the back of the house, Mr Warrender. If you will allow me to remove the luggage and will leave the key I will put the car away. I am familiar with this model."

Mr Warrender looked a little surprised and led the way into the house.

The furniture was old-fashioned and shabby but what there was, was comfortable. To the right of the stone-flagged hall was a sitting-room. Above the marble mantelpiece in here was a stuffed fox in a glass case at which Mackie barked, and some curious pictures on the walls. The room smelled damp and stuffy. On the other side was a dining-room with the table laid for a meal, and next door was an enormous kitchen also with a stone floor and a fire burning in an old-fashioned range. Beyond this was a vast scullery with a door leading into the yard.

Donaldson came back and promised them tea and bacon and eggs in a quarter of an hour, and so they went upstairs to explore the upper floors. Mr Warrender and Jon brought up the luggage while Donaldson looked after the meal. There were plenty of bedrooms and the children had a room each, except for Jon and David, who preferred to share. On the top floor were three rooms, one of which was little more than an attic, and another which Donaldson had taken for himself as there was a bed in it. From the smaller attic it was possible to step out of the window on to a pleasant little square of flat roof which Dickie wanted to explore at once. But by the time they had unpacked and washed, the old house was filled with the smell of frying bacon and they went downstairs to eat. Donaldson looked a little worried and nervous and they could hear him apparently talking to himself when he was in the kitchen.

"He's advising himself," Dickie whispered to Mary. "I think he's a super chap. I'm going to find out what he was doing in the navy..."

Then Penny looked at her new watch and with a catch in her voice said:

"It's half-past nine! What can have happened to David and Peter. Surely they should be here by now? They were going to Ashburton by bus and then they were going to try to hire bikes."

5. The Stolen Bicycle

As soon as the Warrenders' car had disappeared on the last stage of its journey David walked over to the other station in Exeter to wait for Peter. It was grand to see Jon and Penny again, and he had liked Penny's parents very much.

The train from Shrewsbury and Hereford was due, so he bought a ticket and went on to the platform. He saw her before she saw him. Her hair seemed fairer than ever. Her skin was delicately tanned, her eyes blue and steady and there was a tiny frown on her forehead as she looked for him in the crowd.

Then she saw him and blushed.

"Hello!" he said as he took her bag. "Everything all right? Good journey? How's your father?"

She laughed. "What a lot of questions! Yes. Dad's fine, thanks. Sent his regards to you." Then she looked him straight in the eyes. "It's good to see you, David. Wasn't it grand of Penny to ask us. How is she?"

"As red-headed and excitable as ever. She's very proud of her father and mother. They're nice too. You know they've all gone on in the car, don't you? They managed to squeeze the twins and Mackie in too. Did I tell you on the phone what I thought we'd do?"

"I expect so," she said as she gave up her ticket. "I've started my holiday now so I don't care what happens. You can do all the organizing."

Seated on top of the bus she gave him the news of Tom and Jenny, the other Lone Piners in Shropshire. She had seen them both yesterday at Ingles Farm, where Tom worked for his uncle, and had helped them all with the harvest.

"Jenny is as marvellous as ever, David. She never stops talking and is always wide-eyed over some romantic story she's been reading. She would

have loved to have come but she'd never leave Tom and the Ingles. Tom doesn't say much of course, but he deserves a holiday and he wants me to write to him. Now tell me about the twins... And Jon, of course. You haven't said anything about him! I like him so much, David, but sometimes he is just a little superior. The twins will look after him, though."

David laughed. "Jon's all right and the twins are just the same-----Sorry. I didn't mean to be funny. They're excited of course and seem to have adopted the new Mr and Mrs Warrender. I only hope they're all feeling the same about the twins now. They've had them for over an hour and I should think they're nearly at King's Holt."

"I've only seen pictures of Dartmoor, David," Peter admitted. "Tell me about it."

"I tried to find King's Holt on a map but can't see it. Jon said it wasn't far from Two Bridges so I know whereabouts it is. There's the prison at Princetown of course, and I believe there are lots of treacherous bogs on the Moor. If you step in one you may never get out. Ponies and sheep are swallowed up and never seen again. There are hardly any tracks, and another thing is that mist often comes down without any warning."

"Well!" said Peter. "What a wonderful place! Sounds grim to me. I like Shropshire better than that, David. What else happens?"

"People fish in the Dart and the other rivers, I s'pose, and there's plenty to explore if you don't mind walking and have got a compass. There are plenty of big hills called Tors, and then there are the villages to see like Widdecombe and Chagford and Moretonhampstead."

"Are we near anywhere? One of those villages, I mean?"

"No. There's a tiny place called Hexworthy near Dart Meet. We don't seem to be far from there, but if you look at the map there really isn't much on it except streams and contour lines... If you're bored, I daresay you could catch a wild pony and break it in."

Peter laughed.

"We shan't be bored. It'll be lovely to explore a new place, but I don't want too much fog and too many bogs... I say, David, we will be able to ride over the Moor on the cycles if we can hire them. It'll probably take us some time to cycle all that distance but it will be a marvellous way to arrive."

"It's certainly a long way, Peter, and mostly uphill. I hope you can leave your luggage here."

"There's sure to be a local carrier who'll be able to bring it over to King's Holt."

There was no sign that Ashburton was the eastern gateway to the Moor but it was a pleasant little town. The shops were closing, but they did find the dark little cycle shop in a back street. The two machines produced by the old shopkeeper were far from new, but the man swore they were sound and that the brakes were in order. He also promised to pass her suitcase on to the local carrier on Monday.

So David took Peter's rucksack on his own back and after saying "Goodbye and thank you" they mounted and set off. At first the road was flat and easy but soon, after crossing the Dart at Holne Bridge, the road, overhung with trees, climbed steeply. The hill up which the Warrenders had roared in their new car in a few minutes took David and Peter over half an hour, pushing their bicycles. They did not hurry. It was a wonderful evening and as soon as they reached the top of the hill they saw the Moor in all its majesty.

An hour later they reached the top of the great hill running down to Dart Meet and they rushed down it like the wind. By the swiftly flowing river far below they could see a large, grassy space packed with parked cars and a crowd of people standing by the water. When they were near the bridge Peter, who was a few yards in front, called over her shoulder:

"Stop here, David... Stop!... I want to see this."

David slithered to a stop, while Peter, with another yell, shot farther ahead and was only checked by the steep ascent of the hill on the other side of the bridge. He ran after her and, to his relief, saw that she was laughing.

"That was lucky," she gasped. "If the hill hadn't been in the way, I'd be flying. The brakes don't seem very good."

"Silly old idiot," David muttered. "He'd no right to hire out a bike like that. I'll have a look at it in a sec. Leave it by mine now and we'll go and look at the water. Seems a sort of show-place and there's a chap selling fruit and ices and drinks. Come and have one."

David bought her an orange squash and a choc-ice for himself before they walked over to the river bank.

Twenty minutes later they remembered that they ought to be on their way. The sun was out of sight now behind the Tors and the car park was nearly empty as they wandered back to the bridge.

David's bicycle was where he had left it but Peter's was not.

"But that's silly!" she said. "I saw you put it there. You said you were going to look at the brakes. Somebody's taken it, David."

"If they have it must be a mistake," he said grimly. "Nobody in their senses would take it and on these hills they'll soon be in trouble... Somebody must have moved it, Peter. You look the other side of the road and I'll go back and search among the cars."

Peter was too bewildered to do more than lean against the stonework of the bridge. This could not possibly be a thing which could really happen! It was absurd. Who could arrive at Dart Meet and want to take a second-hand bicycle.

She stepped into the road and suddenly, round the sharp corner a few yards above the bridge, came a man on a bicycle. He was wobbling dangerously and as he flashed past, missing her by inches, she was sure that he was on her bicycle.

"Hi!" she shouted. "Hi! That's mine. *Stop!*"

But he could not stop. He was travelling so fast that she had no idea what he looked like except that he was young and had a lot of black hair. Then she realized that he was trying to stop on the slope and when he was about fifty yards away he jumped off and turned round and pushed the cycle back towards her.

Peter was usually rather shy, but now she was so angry that she stood by the side of the road glaring at him. She did not even look round for David for she knew exactly what she was going to say and how icy cold and sarcastic she was going to be. Then she saw that the stranger was young, nice-looking in a sort of ugly way with black hair falling across his forehead. And the funny thing was that he did not look guilty or ashamed. He just looked hot and annoyed.

She was standing a few yards from the bridge and although he gave her an approving glance as he reached her (Peter was a very pretty girl) he walked straight past and leaned the bicycle against the wall of the bridge, almost exactly where David had left it three quarters of an hour ago. Then he mopped his forehead and looked at her again.

"I s'pose you know that's my bike," Peter said in a voice which did not sound at all like her own.

"Is it?" the young man said. "Why don't you have the brakes attended to? They're dangerous. I might have killed myself."

She felt herself going very pink and even pinker when she realized that he was smiling at her rather cheekily.

"But you *stole* it!" she squeaked. "You're a thief."

"Don't be silly," he said. "I only borrowed it and very uncomfortable and dangerous it was. You ought to do something about the brakes."

Penny would have thought of something to say quickly enough, but Peter was not often impetuous and couldn't think of a suitable reply. Luckily David dashed up and the two boys glared at each other.

"What is it, Peter? Oh, I see. He's brought your bike back. Decent of him!"

"It isn't decent of him at all," Peter almost shouted. "He pinched it but he calls it borrowing. And what do you think? He says the brakes are dangerous. Fancy that! He's warned me about them."

David glanced at her and thought how nice she looked and the stranger evidently thought the same.

"I'm sorry," he said very deliberately to her. "Don't be too mad with me, please. I only borrowed it," and he grinned engagingly. Then David, liking him suddenly, smiled too but Peter struggled hard to put this cheeky young man in his place. She was not very successful.

"But you can't go round Dartmoor borrowing bikes like that," she protested. "You say you're sorry but I don't think you care. It's a hired cycle and we should have had to pay for it."

"Not much you wouldn't!" the stranger laughed. "I had to have a bike in a hurry and yours was the nearest. There was a chap in a car I thought I recognized. I had to follow him. I don't really see what you're fussing about anyway. I couldn't have been away more than a quarter of an hour and when you're on a job you have to take all sorts of risks... Where are you two going anyway? You're travelling light."

"The least you can do is to tighten up the brakes," Peter said indignantly. "I can see from here that the screw of one of the brake blocks is loose."

The young man smiled again and pushed the bicycle on to the grass. It was difficult not to like him. As he felt in his pockets he said:

"I've generally got a spanner about me. My three-speed has gone wrong and that's why I haven't got my bike with me this evening. Here we are! This job won't take long but you should be more careful."

Peter could not be angry any longer. She caught David's eye and saw that he was already smiling. Then they both laughed and she said, "I've never met

anybody with such a nerve but I suppose I shall forgive you if you mend my bike for me. Why did you take it, anyway?"

"I told you. When you're on the job you can't always wait to ask permission. I'm sorry if you were bothered but I had to have a bike right away. I just took the first one. Soon as I got on it at the top of the hill I realized I'd picked a loser... There you are. That's O.K. now. The brake block was loose. My name's Dan. Dan Sturt. Who are you?"

David winked at Peter and said,

"You said something about being on the job. What sort of a job is it that makes you pinch the nearest bike?"

Dan dropped the cycle on the grass and put the spanner back in his pocket.

"I'm a reporter," he said. "I think I'm on to something big. It's very important to me to get a good story. Who are you? Holiday-makers, I s'pose?"

David made up his mind.

"Yes, we are. This is Petronella Sterling and I'm David Morton. We are on holiday and joining friends at a house called King's Holt somewhere round here. Do you know it?"

Dan grinned broadly. "Of course I do. I know it well. It's about three miles up the road. So you're the people who have taken the place? Well, I'm blowed! I didn't expect that sort of party."

"Tell us about it," Peter said. "We ought to be going because it's getting late, but we'd like to know why you had to follow somebody who was in a car. I shouldn't think you could catch him on that bike, anyway."

"But I did. I guessed where he might be going and I was right. I wonder whether you two could help me? I'm on a paper in Plymouth but I live at Princetown. My mother has a cafe there."

"Let's all have an ice or a drink before that chap with the stall closes down for the night," David suggested. "We'll help you if we can but you must tell us your story, mustn't he, Peter. Tell us about King's Holt too."

Dan looked at Peter again and nodded.

"All right. I don't know how I'm going to get home but a few minutes won't make much difference. It was decent of you to lend me your bike, anyway. Thanks very much."

Peter gasped with surprise but seeing that David was keen to find out more about the mysterious young man and his job she just led the way over to the fruit stall.

"Hello, young Dan," the man said. "How's your mother getting on? I was just closing up but what do you want? Friends of yours?"

"That's right," Dan said shortly. "We thought we'd have three of the orange drinks, and if you're not going back to Princetown for a quarter of an hour or so I'd be grateful for a lift. I haven't got my bike but my friends are O.K. Mother's fine, thanks."

The man looked at David and Peter curiously and opened three bottles. "Have a lift and welcome," he smiled.

They took their drinks over to the river bank and Peter, who was beginning to enjoy herself, smiled at Dan and said:

"Go on, Mr Sturt. Tell us."

"Mr Sturt," he gasped. "Call me Dan, please. They call you Peter, do they? What do you want to know, Peter?"

"What we want to know," David said firmly, "is how you know King's Holt. The parents of a friend of ours have taken it furnished. Mr and Mrs Warrender knew Dartmoor before they went abroad, but none of us others have seen it before."

"They've just come for a holiday, have they?" Dan insisted. "Fishing and that sort of thing."

"That's the sort of thing. What's it like?"

So Dan told them how he knew it and about the owls and how it had once belonged to three old ladies.

"I've never been inside, of course, but you can see through the windows. It's lonely enough if that's what you like."

"We shan't mind," Peter smiled. "I live in the Shropshire hills and they're lonely enough. Not so bleak and unfriendly as the Moor, though. Tell us what it's like to be a reporter. Is it thrilling?"

"It's hard work," Dan said, "but it's a grand life."

The latter was not strictly true but Dan can hardly be blamed if he romanced a little. Peter was a good listener and obviously very impressed. David was too. He liked Dan and was sure that he was really excited about something.

"Tell us how we can help you," he broke in. "And what about this chap you were following? We must go soon but we're in this with you now as you pinched Peter's bike."

"It's like this," Dan began. "I told you I'm after a big story just to prove that although I'm only eighteen I can do anything they ask me. I thought I'd got something wonderful a few nights ago but my editor didn't think anything of it. Anyway he didn't print it and sort of suggested I was imagining things. I wasn't. I know what I saw and I'm out to prove that I'm right but I can't tell you all about that now. It's top secret." Peter's eyes sparkled.

"Top secret? You sound like a book, Dan."

"Do you want to hear this or not? This is serious."

"Sorry, Dan. I won't interrupt again. Please go on."

"O.K... I like to go out on the moor every night after I've had my supper. I generally go on my bike but it's out of order so tonight I walked. I was looking at the water down at Two Bridges by the hotel when a car passed me and I thought I recognized the driver. I can't tell you more now but he was a rum little chap with one of those tweed hats that fishermen wear. He was part of the story I got the other night and I never thought I'd see him again.

"I couldn't have kept up with him on my bike, but I was sure that it might help me to prove my story if I could find out whether he was staying round here. I'd got to find out more about him, see? Just then another car came along with a couple of holiday people and I asked them for a lift. They were very decent and said they were going to Ashburton and I said that was fine for me. I couldn't ask them to hurry but I soon saw the little black car ahead and as my two weren't racing we kept behind him without any fuss. There's a road to the right just up the top of the hill there" - and he pointed ahead of him in the direction of Two Bridges - "which leads to a tiny place called Hexworthy. There's a hotel there called the White Lion which is always full up at this time of year. Anyway the black car turned down there and before I could think of what to say we were down here on the bridge. I felt a bit of a fool when I asked them to stop. Told them I'd changed my mind and wanted to go to Hexworthy after all. They looked at me as if I was mad and I don't blame them and soon as they'd put me down I grabbed your bike. I had a hunch that Tweed Hat might be staying at the White Lion."

"And was he?" Peter asked excitedly. "This is *terrific*, Dan. P'raps we ought to tell you that we sometimes have some grand adventures. Was he staying there?"

"Yes, he was," Dan said triumphantly. "Your bike nearly killed me but when I got to the hotel the old car was outside. I walked in and looked round the lounge. He wasn't there so I went into the bar. The place was full but I spotted him at once. He was talking to another chap about fishing... Now I've got to find out still more about him."

David looked at him in admiration.

"That's a good story," he said. "You haven't told us enough though."

Before he could answer, the man at the fruit stall shouted, "Come on, young Dan. I'm going now. Can't stay here all night."

"I'll have to go now," Dan said as he stood up. "It's a five mile walk and my mother will be worried. Maybe we could meet again, Peter?"

Peter blushed and looked first at David. Then she said, "Come and see us at King's Holt tomorrow morning, Dan. It's Sunday so you won't be working. You can tell us some more then."

"All right," he smiled. "I will. That'd be grand. Cheerio! Your way is straight along the main road. Don't go to Hexworthy. You can't miss King's Holt. There's a drive up and a spinney of fir trees," and he ran over to the waiting car.

Peter got up and stretched.

"Well," she said. "That was fun. Isn't he nice, David?"

David grunted.

"You didn't *mind* me asking him tomorrow did you, David?"

"Oh no," he said airily. "Not at all. The more the merrier. Let's get going," and he led the way over to the bridge and their bicycles.

A quarter of an hour later they saw the clump of fir trees and two shadowy figures standing at the edge of the road.

"That's Jon and Penny!" Peter gasped. "We should not have been so long, David. I bet they're going to be furious with us."

Jon stepped forward and held out his arms like a policeman. "Hello, you two," he drawled. "Nice of you to come. What's gone wrong?"

Peter let her bicycle fall.

"We're very, very sorry. We've had a bit of an adventure since we collected the two bikes in Ashburton. I'm so tired now that I can't even begin to tell

you how I hate and loathe the beastly machine."

Penny linked her arm in hers.

"Don't worry, Peter. You're here now and that's all that matters and we're not worried any more. This King's Holt is superb. Absolutely enormous. Full of ghosts I should think. Echoing footsteps and clanking chains... And you're not the only ones to have an adventure I may as well tell you... Hello, David! You've not noticed me. You're neglecting me."

"I won't, Penny. I promise. Trouble is it's too dark to see you. We're full of gassy drinks and it would be wonderful if you'd give us something to eat. We want to meet your parents too."

"Come on in then," Jon said as he picked up Peter's bicycle. "The twins ought to be in bed by now and if you can keep awake we've got an odd sort of story to tell you. I wished you'd been with us, David."

"Mind the potholes in the drive," Penny warned as she led the way into the shadows under the whispering pine trees. The moon was not yet up and it was too dark for them to see each other's faces. The two boys were behind, pushing the cycles, when Penny said over her shoulder:

"Don't tell them any more now, Jon. Let's wait until after supper. I ought to tell you two that now we've had time to explore the house properly we've found a room on the first floor furnished as a sitting-room and my mother says we can all have that for our own. She's promised that they'll never even come in unless they're invited."

"We've got a sort of butler too," Jon added. "Decent sort of chap who was in the navy. That's a bit of luck for us. The other thing I've got to tell you though is very, very serious. I don't suppose that Peter will realize how serious it is, although David will."

"But I can't wait until after supper," Peter complained. "I shall be asleep by then anyway. What's the mystery, Jon?"

"I'll tell you," Penny said cheerfully. "We've seen a Flying Saucer. Only a teeny one of course, but Jon knows all about them."

Jon snorted with disgust but before he could answer they heard a curious, high-pitched whine that seemed to fill the air around them. To David and Peter the sound was meaningless, but Jon and Penny had heard it before and were never likely to forget it.

"That's it again, I tell you... Look in the sky. Look in the sky!" Jon shouted excitedly.

The whining teased their ear-drums and then died away. Overhead between the branches of the pine trees the first stars gleamed pale and bright and that was all they could see.

6. Settling Down

It was ten minutes past eight next morning when Jon walked down the big staircase of King's Holt. The old house looked shabbier than ever in full daylight, but he could see that although the furniture was old-fashioned it was certainly good. Rather to his surprise he heard familiar voices from the dining-room and when he walked in, it was to see Dickie and Mary already sitting at the table with the man Donaldson putting out plates and knives and forks.

"Good morning, Jonathan," Mary said primly. "We're feeling much better this morning and we're hungry. Mr Donaldson is getting our breakfasts just as fast as his legs will carry him, he says."

"If you're feeling so much better why don't you help him?" Jon suggested as he patted Mackie.

"That's just the sort of thing you always say to us," Dickie said. "If you'll excuse us saying so, Jon, that's just where you're iggerent. We've asked Mr Donaldson if we can help him and *he* says he'd be hundred times quicker without us. Didn't you, Mr Donaldson?"

The man smiled rather ruefully at Jon and wished him "Good morning."

"Hardly know where anything is myself yet," he added. "Very good of these youngsters to offer to help but until I know my way round I reckoned I'd do better on my own."

"There you are!" Dickie said triumphantly. "You don't really like us, Jon, and it makes Mary and me very sad, doesn't it, twin?"

"Oh, yes it does, twin. When I'm away at school in the term thinkin' of the wonderful holidays I get all upset when I think of Jon hating us."

"Little idiots," Jon said good humouredly. "Any holiday would be dull without you. What's the matter with you? Couldn't you sleep?"

"We were disturbed," Mary said with a meaning glance at Donaldson. "I think Mr Donaldson was too. He keeps on yawning."

Just for a second Jon thought that the man looked rather taken aback so he said, "Behave yourselves, twins," and to Donaldson, "Don't take any notice of them. You'll get used to them in time."

Donaldson nodded and went out into the kitchen. Then Mr Warrender came in followed by his wife, Peter and David.

Considering that he was single-handed and in a strange house, Donaldson did extremely well. Fresh milk had arrived from somewhere, there were cornflakes and toast - the slices were not very dainty but it was toast - and they could all smell sausages every time the kitchen door opened.

The twins were rather ominously silent. They seemed to be sharing one of their ridiculous secrets and nudged each other occasionally. Peter had always been one of their favourites, and once or twice Mary gave her a radiant smile; but apart from that gesture they took little part in the general conversation. But David was suspicious of them and not altogether surprised when they came out into the open.

It was just as Donaldson had put a plate of sausage and egg in front of Dickie that he looked up and said:

"Thank you *very* much. This looks absolutely delicious. It smells like my favourite sausages... EXCUSE US, but there's something very speshull we wanted to ask you."

"Not now, Dickie," Mrs Warrender said but Mary took up the tale in a flash.

"Acksherley it's only a little thing we wanted to ask and know that Mr Donaldson will be able to tell us. When we came yesterday in Mr Warrender's super car we saw what this moor place looks like..."

"Heather an' streams an' rocks an' ponies," Dickie broke in. "That's it. Heather and stuff... What we really want to know is what the moor looks like at night?"

There was a long pause and then David said sharply, "Don't be so stupid, Mary."

"We're not stupid. We want to know 'cos we're always in bed when it's dark and we're sure Mr Donaldson knows."

At this, Donaldson gave a muffled snort and strode into the kitchen. The twins looked at each other innocently and then Dickie said, "Oh, dear! What have we done? Wasn't his face red?"

Mrs Warrender looked surprised, and said, "I really don't think you should speak to Donaldson like that, Dickie. What *did* you mean?"

Just for a moment they looked a little abashed and then Mary said brightly:

"We're really very sorry if we've done anything acksherley wrong. P'raps we ought to go and say we're sorry?"

"Don't you do anything of the sort," David said sharply. "Just behave yourselves. I apologize for them, Mrs Warrender. They're very babyish sometimes," and then Peter, after a quick glance at the culprits, changed the conversation.

When they had finished breakfast Mr Warrender got up and stood in front of the empty fireplace.

"This is our first day," he said, smiling at them all. "I just want to say again what I told Penelope even before I saw this place. I'm sure it's all going to turn out well, but I want you all to know that as long as you don't make nuisances of yourselves you're free to do exactly as you like. We want Penelope to enjoy her friends, and we'd like to say that we think she's chosen very well. None of you are to feel hurt because Mrs Warrender and I don't ask you to be with us always. I'm going to spend a lot of time fishing and she's going to do some sketching. Later on, if all works out well, we may even go off to Cornwall in the car for a few days. Penelope tells me that you're all used to amusing yourselves. We'll talk to Donaldson, and I've no doubt he'll be able to provide sandwiches if you want to go out for the day."

David and Peter thanked him and then Mrs Warrender looked doubtfully at the twins.

"What about you two? Forgive me asking but I don't know you very well and I'm wondering whether you're not a little small to go exploring with the others? Would you like to come with us today? We shan't be going very far."

"Thank you *very* much," Mary said quickly before her twin could speak. "Sometimes we'd love to come with you 'cos we're very, very keen on seeing people paint pictures. But please don't worry 'bout us. We're quite used to being with the big ones and Jon told us once that a holiday with us isn't like any other holiday... Don't scowl, Jon. You *did* say so, an' anyway - now you've made me forget what I was going to say."

"I haven't forgot," Dickie said quickly. "Acksherley we've something important to discuss with the big ones... Jolly important," he added with considerable satisfaction.

"That's mutual," David said grimly. "We've got something important to say to you too. Thank you for offering to take them off our hands, Mrs Warrender, but you don't know yet what it would mean. We're used to them and I am responsible for them."

Then Peter, who was always their champion, laughed at Mary and said, "Life wouldn't be the same without them and not quite as Jon meant. We'll look after them, Mrs Warrender."

Then, in spite of some protests from Donaldson, they carried out the breakfast things and then went up to make their beds. Penny came into the boys' room to help them and they arranged to go out on to the moor as soon as possible and find a place where they could talk.

"Has Peter told you about her new boy friend?" David said as he watched Penny help Jon to make his bed. "He promised to call here this morning. He's part of our story and I'd like you to meet him. Decent bloke."

Then he went to the door and shouted for Peter.

"You're not going to desert Dan, are you? Do you think he'll come?"

"Of course he'll come," she said as she came in. "But there's no need for us all to wait in for him. I s'pose you've been telling Penny and Jon about him and trying to be funny."

"No he hasn't, Peter," Penny laughed. "I suppose Dan is why you were late last night? Tell us quickly."

"He lives in Princetown where his mother keeps a cafe and he's on a newspaper in Plymouth. You'll like him," Peter smiled.

"But why does he want to come here?" Jon asked. "I should have thought there were enough of us already. I've got something very important to tell you. Something serious. We don't want strangers in on this - Sorry, Peter, but you know what I mean."

She flushed. "It's a long story but Dan's had a curious adventure too and he wants us to help him. It could easily be an adventure for us, couldn't it, David?"

"Yes it could. All the same let's look round before we decide what to do. Where are the twins?"

"Probably saying they're sorry to Donaldson," Jon suggested. "What I've got to tell you is a bit over their heads I think, but I suppose they'll be sensible."

"Of course they will," Peter said, quite sharply for her. "You must remember, Jon, that half the time they're putting on an act. They just pretend to be babyish and silly. You know how sensible and loyal they can be."

"All right," he laughed. "Let's go out and have a look round first and then we can decide what to do about this chap Dan."

In the yard behind the house the twins were saying an affectionate "Goodbye" to Mrs and Mr Warrender as if they had known them all their lives and were not going to see them for ten years. As soon as the car had

gone, however, they behaved sensibly and, with Mackie, followed the others down the track to the river. On the other side the slopes of Swincombe Tor rose steeply and Penny suggested that they all climb to the top.

"Once we're up there we shall be able to see for miles. Maybe we could see the road and drive to the house, and when Peter's friend comes maybe we shall be able to see him too... Tell you what. Why not leave a message with Donaldson and ask him to tell Dan to follow us up to the top of that Tor thing. He couldn't miss it or us, could he?"

"We don't think that's a good idea at all," Mary said quickly. "It wouldn't be a good idea to give Donaldson a message, we mean. We're sure it wouldn't."

"What is all this nonsense about Donaldson?" David said. "Do stop fooling, twins."

"We're not," Dickie said. "Honestly we're not, but we're not quite ready to, to-----"

"Disclose all," Mary added proudly. "We'll tell you what we'll do though. If Peter will tell us what this friend is like we'll go to the road and wait for him and bring him to the top of that mountain. We'd do that, wouldn't we, twin?"

Dickie nodded. "Jus' tryin' to be helpful. That's us. We'll do it if we don't have to wait too long. We'll take Mackie to guard us and we'll find this man and guide him through the trackless wastes and over the rapids and up the glassers of yonder mountain-----"

"All right," Peter interrupted. "We've heard all that before. Will you really do that, twins? If he's coming, he'll be here in the next hour. His name is Dan Sturt and he's a bit taller than David and has black hair. I expect he'll come on his bike if he's had time to mend it. I don't think we told him about you, so you'll have to explain who you are."

"Why don't you give us a dokkerment to prove it?" Mary suggested. "He'll come along on his trusty bike and then he'll see us and we'll say: 'Good morning, Dan Shirt-----' "

"Sturt, twin... An' then we'll hand him the dokkerment an' he'll read it and believe us."

Jon took a notebook and a stub of pencil from his pocket.

"Good idea," he said. "Sign the dokkerment, Pete, and let them go."

So Peter wrote - *"Dan. These twins belong to us and they'll show you where we are. On the top of the hill on the other side of the river. Peter and David."*

Dickie took the paper and put it in his pocket.

"Trust us. We don't mind doing this for you. Farewell," and the twins, without a backward look, went back towards the house.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Mary said, "Jon wants to get rid of us *as usual*. They've got something secret, twin. It's always the same. Why did you say we'd do this?"

"Nothing special. Thought it might be fun. We could see if we like this man and maybe he'll tell us why he's suddenly a friend of Peter's... Mary. Shall we go an' talk to him again? Or spy on him and see what he's doin'?"

Mary shook her head. "I don't think so. I think he's really mad with us. We'll see what the others have to say before we tell them what we know."

The sun was high now and the twins carefully stepped over each of the black barred shadows of the pine trees thrown across the drive. Then they sat on the grass verge at the edge of the main road with Mackie.

"Are we going to like this holiday, Mary?" Dickie said. "D'you think something is going to happen?"

"Something generally does, twin. It's not very excitin' but I'm sure it will be... Here he comes, Dickie. I bet that's him. Are we going to like him?"

Dan looked hot and he did not seem to notice the twins.

"Hi!" Dickie shouted as he jumped up. "Hi! Dan Sturt. We got something for you."

Dan braked and nearly fell off. Then his eyes opened wide with surprise as he saw the twins.

"Who are you?" he gasped. "How do you know my name? Do you live here, too?"

"My name is Mary Morton. This is my brother, Richard. We're twins. Peter told us your name and we've got a dokkerment to prove it and we've lived here since last night. How do you do, Dan. Good morning."

Dan laughed.

"But you're terrific... You say something, Richard. I s'pose your voices are alike, too?"

"Here's the dokkerment," Dickie obliged. "Read it and follow us... This is our dog called Macbeth. You want to be careful not to annoy us 'cos he's fierce and doesn't like us to be upset."

Dan read the note and laughed again.

"Lead on," he said. "I know the way but you can show me again. Would one of you like to wheel my bike? It's stuck in top gear so I had to walk up all the hills."

"No, thank you," Mary said politely. "It's too big for us to push... If you follow us carefully we'll show you the way. King's Holt is a very pleasant old house."

"Is it really? I'm so glad. Whose idea was it for you to come and meet me?"

"Acksherley it was ours. We thought we'd like to see you first. See if we liked you... We're very partikkeler."

"Are you, though? You wouldn't be cheeky, would you? I don't want to make a mistake about you when we've only just met, but I wouldn't like you

to be saucy."

Mary opened her eyes wide and for a moment he wondered if her lip was quivering.

"You're not going to be difficult and unkind to us, are you, Dan?" she quavered. "We want to be friends. That's why we came to meet you."

Dan was not so sure but did not want any tears. He was more anxious to know why Peter or David had not waited for him, so he asked Dickie if they knew.

"They've got something secret they want to talk about. They think we don't know, but we do. We don't mind 'cos we've found out something they don't know. We shall find out what they're whisperin' about in the end. We always do... This is the house. Do you like it?"

Dan nodded gravely. "I've never been in it and it looks a bit tired outside, but I'm sure I shall like it when I know it better."

Dickie looked at him suspiciously. He hoped Dan was not trying to be clever.

As they walked through the yard, Donaldson came out of the back door and stared at them. Mary smiled at him graciously and Dan said, "Who's he? Thought you said you were all on top of Swincombe Tor?"

"His name is Donaldson," Dickie said solemnly. "He helps us in the house and does the cooking. *But he isn't what he seems!*"

And that was all they would say. Donaldson watched them without a sign of recognition for a minute and then went in again. Dan left his bicycle by the water butt beside which he had crouched the other night and followed them down the track to the stepping stones. Before crossing, Dan looked up at Swincombe Tor. On the flat rocks on the summit he could see four figures and he believed that one of them was waving. He waved back and then hurried across the stepping stones closely followed by his guides.

They were all puffed when they reached the rocks at the top of the Tor, and after Dan had been introduced to Jon and Penny he lay back in the sun and closed his eyes.

"Very nice to see you all," he murmured. "But why choose the top of a hill on a hot day? Why not by the river to save yourselves a climb like this?"

"Because of the wonderful view, Dan," Penny said. "We can see miles from here. If you look up there above those patches of bright green, which Jon says are bogs, there's what looks like a flat building. We've been wondering what it is... It must be a very, very exciting thing to work on a newspaper."

Dan sat up.

"Not so wonderful as you might think. A chap gets a lot of disappointments, however smart he is."

Peter and Penny looked sympathetic and David said:

"Tell us about it, Dan. You told us last night you were on to something. I've told the others how we met you and we're all glad you came along today."

Before Dan could answer, Mackie barked wildly and dashed into the heather. The twins ran after him but whatever he was chasing was faster than he was and the three of them were soon half-way down the hill.

"Now tell us some more," Peter said. "They won't be back yet. What's gone wrong? Perhaps we could help? Is it to do with that man you followed to Hexworthy last night?"

"It might be. I'm pretty sure it is. I told you two last night how keen I was to get a real story for the paper. I've got to prove that I can do it. About a week ago I got - by luck, I admit - what might be the scoop of the year. I wrote it up and gave it to the News Editor and he told me not to bring any more ridiculous stories."

"But what was the story?" Penny said impetuously.

"I'm telling you. I know I'm right because I'm not the only one who's seen what I've seen at night."

"But what have you seen?" Jon snapped.

Dan looked away to the south at the rolling moor high by the source of the Swincombe brook.

"I've seen a flying saucer," he said quietly. Penny broke the long silence.

"So have we. And more than a hundred miles away, too. Jon's mother saw it too and so did a man staying at our hotel."

Dan's mouth opened in surprise, but before he could answer Penny went on, "And there's another thing. We heard one last night."

"That's odd," Dan said. "I thought I heard it too. I was going to bed, but two cars were passing and I couldn't be sure."

Jon looked at David and nodded. He was wildly excited. "What did I tell you? Now maybe we're really on to something... This is amazing, Dan. Don't know how much you know about the scientific side of all this but what Penny says is true. We *have* seen a saucer down at Rye in Sussex. The whining noise we heard then was the same as we heard here. But we didn't see anything last night... Anyway I can tell you that there are flying saucers. Many have been seen and some have been photographed... You'd better tell us what you know, Dan, and we'll swap yarns. I believe you, even if your editor doesn't. Maybe we could help you... Don't you believe me, Peter? Why are you looking so worried?"

Peter was looking over the Moor with her hands clasped round her knees.

"I don't know that I'm worried, Jon. I hate the sort of thing you're talking about. I hated that noise last night when we were in the drive... But there was another noise I heard last night. I was too excited and tired to sleep well. I'm sure I heard some sort of an aeroplane. Not one of those screaming jets but a throbbing noise."

"Did you though?" Dan said. "Might it have been a helicopter? I reckon I'd better tell you what I know."

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"Come down off the skyline," Dan said as he slid off the rocks. "No need to show ourselves," and he held out his hand to help Peter.

They sat down on the sunny side and waited for him to begin his story. Faintly came the sound of Mackie still barking excitedly down by the river and they could just see the twins paddling in the shallows. Across the water, beyond the pine trees, were the chimneys of King's Holt.

"Look," Penny said suddenly. "Sorry to interrupt before you start, Dan, but I can just see one of the windows of the house and there's something flashing."

They followed her pointing finger and it was true that, between the trees, they could just see one window and a small square of flat roof close to it. But although they stared until their eyes ached they saw nothing suspicious.

"I did see something anyway," Penny persisted. "I'm quite sure of it. Like sun on a mirror. I should think that's Donaldson's room up there... Sorry, Dan. Go on with your story."

"All right. You can tell me about this chap Donaldson when I'm through... I told David and Peter last night how keen I am to get a good story for my paper and I'm quite sure I'm near something very big. I was talking to my mother about it the other night - you must all come down to the cafe one day - and she gave me an idea. There's a big secret on the Moor. The people who live round here know a bit about it but they don't talk. I believe it's true that right up there on the top above that patch of bright green which is a bog" - and he pointed to the moor up by the source of the Swincombe river - "there's a secret place which was put up in the war. We didn't live here then of course, but there's some sort of building up there although I can tell you now that there isn't a proper road to it. There's a rough track some of the way by the Swincombe until you come to a reservoir, but I've been making some enquiries since they wouldn't take my story and I've found out

a few things. Now I want proof and I'm hoping that some of you will be able to help me by poking round a bit... if you've got the time, that is."

Jon laughed happily.

"Got the time? Of course we have. That's what time is for. Go on, Dan. You'll be surprised at what I've got to tell you when you're through. What sort of a secret place do you think is up there on the top?"

"I've never been right up but from what I can find out it's a flat, concrete building. It can't be high, can it? I mean, if it had chimneys or a high roof we'd be able to see it from here. Some of it might be underground. My guess is that this secret station is still being used by research scientists or blokes like that."

"But how do they get there?" Penny asked practically. "They must eat I s'pose unless they live on scientific tablets of condensed food. Don't they ever go home for the weekend? How do they get in and out? Or do you think they're just locked in until they've made a flying saucer?"

"Don't try and be funny," Jon said. "I wish I could make you understand that this is serious, Penny."

Penny was not abashed and winked at Peter.

"I'll tell you how I think they get in and out and how they get their supplies," Dan went on. "Peter doesn't realize it but she gave me the clue just now. You're all sure that you heard a saucer last night but Peter heard something else - a 'plane that wasn't a jet. I think she heard a helicopter - and this reminded me that I've heard one before now and one evening I saw one too. It's obvious, isn't it? If the secret station has a flat roof, that's where the 'copter lands and that's how the chaps who work there get in and out."

They looked at him admiringly and then David said quietly, "Where does this man you followed to Hexworthy fit in?"

"That's the puzzle and maybe the story I'm after too. A story about *somebody* is what they like. Listen and I'll tell you when I first saw him."

So Dan told them about his first encounter with the man in the tweed hat.

"That's my story," he finished. "But I'm as sure as I can be that the man I saw that night is staying at the White Lion at Hexworthy. He's got a black car - what's the matter, Penny? Don't you believe me?"

"Believe you? I could believe anything now. We might know that little man because we saw one like him watching our saucer over Dungeness. He wore a tweed hat, he had a black car and his name is Green. At least it was when we knew him... Tell Dan about our saucer, Jon."

So Jon, now more excited than David or Peter had ever seen him, told them his story and finished by saying, "There's one thing Penny forgot to mention. Our Mr Green hurt his hand and didn't seem to want anybody to know about it. He got the doctor to come to him at the hotel and when we saw him at night his hand was bandaged. We could see it clearly. The only other thing we know about him is that he burned some papers in his bedroom and went off next morning in a hurry."

Dan jumped up. "This is absolutely terrific. I knew I was on to something and now I'm sure. My Mister Tweed Hat has got an injured hand, too. When I saw him in the bar of the hotel I noticed it specially because he was telling another bloke there that he'd torn his hand on a fishing hook. He could easily be the same man, couldn't he? I wonder what he calls himself at the hotel? I could find out easily enough I s'pose. There's something very peculiar going on around here. Will you all help me? I'll need you because I have to go to Plymouth every day. My editor as good as told me that there aren't any such things as flying saucers, but we know he's wrong."

"Of course he's wrong," Jon said indignantly. "All sensible people know he is. Anyway you've seen one and so have we and we heard one again last night. I've got to admit that ours at Rye was only very small. More like a model if you know what I mean."

"Course I do," Dan agreed. "So was mine. Very small and pinkish with a light shining out of it. Gone in a flash, though."

Peter stood up and looked across the moor.

"I've got to say this," she said quietly. "Even if what you've both seen is frightfully important I don't like it. Can't we have fun without interfering with things that don't seem to belong to this world?"

Jon looked shocked and Dan amazed. Penny looked wonderingly at her but it was David who spoke up.

"I know what Peter means, but all the same, Pete, you'd like to help Dan get this story, wouldn't you? I think he's right about funny goings-on here and if there is a secret station there's no reason why we shouldn't go and look at it... There's another thing. If the secret station really is there then it must belong to the Government and somebody might be very glad to know that Mr Tweed Hat is snooping round."

"All right," Peter said with rather a shaky laugh. "I know I'm silly about this. We'll help you, Dan, but I hope I never see nor hear one of the beastly things."

Before anyone could speak further Mackie dashed up with lolling tongue and leaped on David. The twins were just behind.

"You all look very severe," Mary puffed as she flopped down beside Peter. "We've had a wonderful time in the river but we saw you all being so serious that we thought we ought to come and cheer you up!"

Dickie, who for once did not seem to be sharing his twin's bright mood, said, "We can tell by the look of you all that you're plannin' and plottin' without us. We always know. You all look sort of smug and we don't like it. What have you been plannin'?"

"Don't be silly, Dickie," David said. "Sit down by Mary and behave yourselves because we want to ask you something. I expect you can help us."

Dickie glanced at Mary and then sat down beside her. He had the sense to realize that his brother was serious.

"We want to know," continued David, "why you asked Donaldson that silly question at breakfast about what the moor looked like at night. *Please* be sensible and tell us."

"All right," Mary agreed. "We've got a secret surprise, but will you promise not to keep us out of things? You know we've helped you before and if you don't you know we'll jolly well find out for ourselves."

David nodded.

"All right. Dan wants us to help him on his newspaper. We've all got to find out things for him and you'll be useful enough. Tell us about Donaldson."

Dickie looked at Mary and they obviously decided without words that Mary should start the story.

"Well. All right then. But don't any of you interrupt. What we're going to say really happened. Listen. An' don't glare at us, Jon. It's very upsettin' to be glared at. Isn't it twin? Yes, it is."

"*Please, please!*" Penny begged in a shaky voice.

"All right. We like you, Penny, 'cept when you're on Jon's side... Well. Last night because it was all strange and new to the little man I let Mackie sleep on the end of my bed. He was very, very tired with all that journey in the train, an' the crowds at the station and makin' friends with Penny's mother and father... *All right*, David! I swear we won't tell you if you interrupt. What's the matter with Jon?"

Jon was now lying on his back drumming the ground with his heels.

"Answer them, somebody," he begged through clenched teeth. "I can't trust myself to speak."

"He's just rude," Dickie said tersely. "Go on, twin."

"Well... Mackie just curled up like I did and we were soon asleep. Of course he can't tell me what he dreams about but sometimes I like to guess and anyway I didn't know the time when the little darling woke me up. He was

all *alert*, you see. He knows he has to guard us all and when I woke the only noise was a tiny, tiny little growl in his throat which shows he's all alert and can hear something we can't."

She had her audience now and even Jon was sitting up again. Dickie was obviously frantic to take up the tale but loyally refrained, although his lips moved in sympathy with Mary's as she went on.

"Well... He growled his warning growl and I sat up in bed and so did he. The moon was shining across the bottom of the bed but although I was very, very sleepy and tired, Mackie did a sudden little grunty bark deep in his froat and wagged his tail an' I said he was a good boy, which he was, and tried to go to sleep again... Then shall I tell you what?"

"Please, please do," Dan begged in a choky sort of voice. And then to David, "Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. And you really live with them?"

"Only in the holidays," David said quickly. "Go on, twins."

"You tell 'em now," Mary said, tossing the ball to Dickie. "Stop if they innerupt."

Dickie cleared his throat.

"Well. Mary said that Mackie went on growlin' and then jumped off the bed and ran to the window, so she had to go and have a look. Our windows look out at the front and there wasn't anything to see there, but Mackie kept on fussin' so Mary got up and came to tell me all about it in the next room. An' all this time Mackie was fussin' and growlin' and we had to pick him up to stop him making a noise and wakin' you all up... O' course we knew that something was wrong but we were very quiet an' brave an'... Well. Listen. This was it. At the end of the passage upstairs, Dan, there's a big window and it looks out over the yard. We went out into the passage very, very quietly and Mackie ran along and put his paws up on the window ledge. When we got there what do you think we saw?"

"We'll tell you," Mary broke in. "We saw Donaldson with a rucksack thing on his back. He was walking across the yard to the path down to the river. We saw him. We really saw him. We're not making this up. It's acksherley true. We saw him plain as plain in the moonlight. He walked quite fast as if he was going somewhere special... Well, that's it. Mr Donaldson is a mystery. Dickie went to look at the time and it was half-past twelve. What we want to know is why he goes off like that in the night with all that on his back? He wasn't just going for a walk, was he?"

"I shouldn't think so," Jon said. "Thank you, twins. What did you do then?"

They both looked a little abashed.

"Acksherley we didn't do anything," Mary admitted. "There wasn't much we could do 'cos we were only in our pyjamas. Dickie wanted to stay up and see if he came back but I went to sleep on the stairs."

"So did I," Dickie admitted loyally. "We were erzausted after our weary travels. So we went back to our beds and Mackie went with Mary, and this morning we got up early and talked about it and we don't think that man is what he thinks he is if you know what we mean. We've got to find out where he goes at night with a bundle on his back. Mary and me don't think he's an ordinary sort of man who cooks and does things in the house if you know what I mean."

"That's a wonderful story, twins," Peter said. "I wish we knew what he was doing. Can you think of anything else that happened?"

"I thought I heard an aeroplane before I went to sleep again," Mary admitted with a frown. "A noisy sort of throbby aeroplane."

"There you are!" Dan said triumphantly. "That's the helicopter again... You're a couple of smart twins. Tell me about this chap Donaldson, David."

David told him all they knew.

"Well," Dan said when David had finished, "It's an odd thing to go out walking on the moor after midnight with a rucksack. It's a pity we don't

know what time he came back and whether his knapsack was still full. Wouldn't be a bad idea to keep an eye on him at night, would it?"

"Marvellous idea." Penny smiled. "Only snag is that some of us like to sleep at night. Why don't you come and camp by the water-butt again, Dan?"

"I know. I know. I do want your help, but I will come and camp down here one night if you like. It doesn't seem fair to ask you all to do so much for me but I do believe we're on to something big... What's the matter with you, young Dickie?"

"Not very much, Nothin' at all, acksherley. All we want to know is what you're talkin' about. You promised to tell us. So tell us. And now."

So Peter, to whom they would always listen, told them as quickly as she could, and Penny added what they had seen from the Gun Garden in Rye, because the twins knew that place. Then Dan told them why he wanted their help and was surprised that they listened so intently. When he had finished and they had all, once again, caught some of his enthusiasm for his job, Dickie said, "We like this very much. Tell us some more about this man in the tweed hat. Mary an' me might be able to do something about him."

"That's the point of it all, of course," Dan said excitedly. "That's what we've got to find out first. Is the man I saw standing up here that night looking at the flying saucer the same chap as Jon and Penny's Mr Green? If he is, does he call himself Green at the White Lion?"

"Only Penny or I will know whether he's the same," Jon said. "We're the only ones here to have seen him in Rye. You'd better tell us where this hotel is and one of us will go and look for him."

"But he'd know you!" Penny laughed. "He'd be silly if he didn't. He must have seen us about at the Dolphin."

"Only one day and that night in the Gun Garden. He went early next morning, remember."

"You'll have to see him without him seeing you," Dan went on. "The point is that if he is the same man the link is clear enough. He goes where there are flying saucers and so far they're at Rye and Dartmoor."

"Of course, these saucers may be at other places too if they're being made and tested on a big scale," Jon suggested. "Both Dungeness and Dartmoor are wild, lonely places, and come to think of it there used to be a gunnery school at Lydd. Anyway I'm sure that most of the land round there is Government property and that's the link."

"What do you think little Mr Green had done to his hand?" asked Penny. "Why didn't he seem to want anyone to know he'd hurt it?"

"I've been puzzling about that, too," Jon admitted. "I heard or read somewhere once that specially trained dogs are often used to guard aerodromes and military camps and that sort of thing. Maybe there's a secret station like this one on Dungeness and that Green, who was snooping round there, might have been attacked by such a dog. He wouldn't want anyone to know but he'd have to tell the doctor, who would never discuss one of his patients anyway."

They all thought that to be a most intelligent suggestion; and then Dan had another idea.

"There's no doubt that Donaldson ought to be watched carefully, and if I can come back with you to the house presently I'd like to see him. I might recognize him. When you've made up your minds about Green - or even if you don't - it will be important to see whether the two men ever meet. You agree, don't you, David?"

"Yes. My trouble is that although I'm not keen like Jon on all this science stuff, it looks to me as if we've tumbled right into something serious. *Why* won't Dan's paper print his story? Do they know about these saucer things over the moor already? The London papers wouldn't take Jon's story, either. Then there's this Mr Green snooping around what looks to be a Government secret. I was wondering whether it's all a bit too serious for us and whether we ought to tell Penny's father. You know how I hate suggesting this, but what do you think, Jon?"

Before Jon could answer Dan broke in.

"But you can't do that to me, David. We must keep this dark until I've got my story. I'm sure you all understand how important this is to me. If we look like being in real trouble of course we shall have to tell somebody, but between us we should have discovered something in a few days. Although I haven't met Mr Warrender yet I know he must be grand" - and here he gave Penny such a smile that she actually blushed - "but I expect that if we told him, he'd be worried and that would spoil his holiday. I don't want to worry my mother. I shan't tell her. I'm not going to say a word at the office either until I've found out something definite. I'm not going to be laughed at again."

"That's all right," David agreed. "Just thought I'd mention it. We can always tell somebody if we unearth something serious."

"It's serious now," Jon said quickly. "None of you seem to realize how important all this is. Up till now there's been only one in millions to have seen a flying saucer. Now there are three of us here who have. And I'll tell you another thing. What we've seen aren't the sort of flying saucers other people have seen. Ours are much smaller and I shouldn't think they could carry men."

Just for a second Penny looked as if she was going to make a fatuous remark but decided against it.

"All right, Jon," David said quietly. "You're the only one here who really knows about these things. Let's settle now how we can best help Dan... First, we're going to keep an eye on Donaldson, although in spite of what the twins said I don't think we have to be suspicious of him. I'm sure he's a nice chap and he'd have a good reason for going out in the middle of the night."

"Maybe you're right," Dan admitted. "All the same I'd like to know whether he ever meets Tweed Hat... And are Jon and Penny going to see whether he's their Mr Green?"

Dan looked doubtful. "It will take us the best part of a day. It's a long way and a stiff climb. You've got to be careful of the bogs. I'd like to come with you, but I s'pose we can't wait until next Sunday."

"And what about the guard dogs?" Penny asked. "I know Peter's not afraid of anything on four legs, but I'm not so keen."

"We'll talk about it later," Jon said hurriedly. "Anyway, Dan, you can be sure some of us will go tomorrow and make a day's outing of it. Tell us the way before you go. We've got to have a look round there. The secret station is the key to it all."

Penny looked at her watch.

"Half-past twelve. Let's go home to lunch and you come with us, Dan, and you can see our Mr Donaldson for yourself. I think he's wonderful. When Dickie and Mary saw him last night I bet he was going fishing... And don't look so superior, Dan. I don't suppose fishes sleep at night and anyway it was moonlight... Come on. Let's go."

They were soon down the hill and after they had crossed the river by the stepping stones, Jon stopped them and said:

"I've got an idea. Some of us aren't quite sure about Donaldson. Suppose we try and get into the house without him knowing and see what he's doing. I think he's all right, but whatever Penny says I'm sure he wasn't going fishing last night... What do you think, David?"

"You'll only find him getting our cold lunch and we shall look idiots creeping about the place."

"Speak for yourself, David," Penny laughed. "I couldn't look idiotic. It's not my fault. I always behave with quiet dignity under the most difficult circumstances... Jon and I will go round to the front door, the twins and Peter could look in the dining-room window and Dan and David, being so brave, will crawl in the back door and inspect the scullery. Wherever Donaldson is I should think he'd be surprised to see us."

None of them expected anything unusual, but Penny really was surprised when, with Jon, they found the front door ajar and heard a man's voice in the hall. With her finger on her lips she gently pushed the door open a few inches.

Donaldson was on the telephone and they heard him say, "564 is sure they're busy. Thinks they'll show themselves soon..."

Then, in his excitement, Jon craned forward and put his hand on Penny's shoulder. She lost her balance and fell against the door which swung back. Donaldson looked up. His expression did not change as he continued his conversation.

"And I'll be glad of a sack of potatoes when the van is next along this way. Thanks very much."

Then as he replaced the receiver he said with a smile to Penny:

"Lunch is ready when you are, miss."

8. The Man with Sandy Hair

As Donaldson told her that lunch was ready Penny felt Jon's fingers prod into her back, and she recovered her wits.

"Oh, thank you," she smiled. "I'm so sorry if I made you jump. I slipped and fell against the door... Would it be very much trouble if we brought a friend to lunch?"

"No trouble at all."

Then David and Dan arrived by way of the back door. Donaldson gave Dan a quick glance and then returned to the kitchen. Penny grimaced fiercely. As the door closed David said, "Well?" and Penny hissed, "Fetch the others but warn them not to talk about our plans at table."

The sideboard in the dining-room was loaded with cold food and, much to the twins' delight, they all helped themselves and sat down where they liked. Donaldson only came in twice to see if they had everything they wanted. On each occasion he was pleasant, friendly and helpful, but asked no questions.

"Don't you worry about us," Penny said on the last occasion. "There's a lot to wash up and we'll bring all these things out and help if you like."

"Very kind of you, but I can manage. You're on holiday and I hope you all enjoy yourselves on the moor," and he smiled as he closed the door firmly behind him.

"Seems O.K. to me," Dan said as he cut himself a piece of cheese. "All the same I'd like to know what he was doing out on the moor last night."

"*Please* don't discuss him now," Penny whispered. "*Please*. We'll go up to our room in a sec. and I'll tell you something. He was speaking on the telephone when we came in."

The sitting-room which Mr and Mrs Warrender had given to the Lone Piners was on the first floor and Jon who was last in closed the door firmly and locked it.

"Now, Penny," he said. "Tell them what you heard Donaldson saying before I knocked you through the door. Pity I did that. I heard him saying something about potatoes. How that chap gets all the food into this place I don't know. Would he have to buy it in Princetown, Dan?"

"I s'pose so. I can find out... What did you hear Donaldson say, Penny? We heard his voice as we came up the passage."

Penny told them what had happened.

"He said a number. 564. Said 564 was expecting them to show themselves soon, or something like that. Anyway it didn't really make sense and then he just ordered some potatoes."

"And he didn't seem very upset when he saw us, did he, Pen?" added Jon.

"No, he didn't, although I don't think he heard us when we were in the porch. He didn't turn a hair. I think he's all right, really. I like him."

"I *could* like him," Peter admitted. "But I'm not sure that we ought to. We know so little about him and nobody has explained yet what he was doing last night. What do you think of him, twins? Do you like him?"

Dickie frowned. "We think we do, but we're sure he isn't what he's pretending to be."

"Mackie likes him," Mary added.

Then Dan walked over to the window.

"I ought to go now, but thanks for asking me. I help my mother on Sunday afternoons. I tell you what I think, and I hope you won't mind me saying this. I believe you all should be careful what you say in front of Donaldson until we've found out more about him. And if he asks you a lot of questions about what you're going to do, be on your guard. Some of you are going to

try and identify Tweed Hat. You can't miss the White Lion in Hexworthy - it's close to the road once you're through the village and stands against the hillside. It's built of grey stone... If you don't mind, I'll cycle over each evening after supper and see if you've got any news. If I can't come I'll telephone, but you must be careful what you say if Donaldson is about. S'pose you can't answer my questions or tell me anything important? What'll you say?"

"Lone Pine," Peter said promptly. "Don't look so surprised, Dan. L-O-N-E P-I-N-E. It means something to us, I promise you. If one of us says 'Lone Pine' you'll know we can't speak freely. Anyway, Dan, come over when you can. We're sure to be in for supper unless something terrific happens... We'll come down to the road with you now before deciding what to do next..."

Jon unlocked the door and they all trooped out into the corridor. Donaldson was standing at the top of the stairs watching them. "Were you looking for us?" Dickie said as he ran forward.

"I was wondering where you all were," Donaldson smiled. "Will you be in to tea?"

Penny thanked him and said "No" and then feeling rather foolish they filed down the stairs and out of the front door into the sunshine.

"I wish I hadn't got to go now," Dan said while they stood round him at the end of the drive. "And thanks again for the meal. I've got an idea that we're on to something... See you all tomorrow evening and if you find out anything today or even tomorrow you can 'phone me after half-past six. Cheerio..."

They watched him cycle slowly down the road and then Jon said quickly, "I like him. Got some sense too. Knows that flying saucers are serious. What are we going to do, David?"

"Let's talk out here," David said. "Donaldson is beginning to give me the creeps. I'm not at all sure that he wasn't listening outside our door. I can't make him out."

Peter frowned. "Neither can I, but as we're going ahead with this business we've got to make him out... Isn't our first job to find out what Dan's Mr Tweed Hat is doing and whether he's still at the White Lion? And if he is, we want to know whether he's Penny's Mr Green. I suggest we put the twins on to that job."

"That's O.K. by us," Dickie shouted. "That's what we've been waiting for. Wastin' all this time when we could have been trackin' and doggin'."

"Tell us where Hexworthy is," Mary said. It was now very hot and she did not give the impression of being quite so keen on an adventure as her twin. "We only want to know 'cos we don't know how to get there."

"It's near Dart Meet just off the main road," David said. "But if this man is Mr Green he'll know Jon and Penny, so those two had better stay on here and keep an eye on Donaldson. I think it might be a better idea if Peter and I go with the twins into Hexworthy. We'll take the two bikes as it's too far to walk and Dickie and Mary will have to ride pillion."

Thus it was settled. And so, half an hour later, David, Peter, the twins and Mackie reached the Hexworthy turning. Then after another steep hill and two sharp hairpin bends they were on the Moor, while ahead of them, set right against the hillside was a long, low building of grey stone. In front of it was a courtyard in which several cars were parked and over the porch hung a huge sign of a white lion with a curly tail.

"What do we do now?" Mary said as David dropped his cycle against a grassy bank opposite the entrance.

"Rest," Dickie said tersely. "I'm sore and erzausted. You big ones have tortured us deliberate."

"Right you are," David agreed. "Climb to the top of the bank and keep your eyes open for anybody who looks like our victim. Peter and I are going into the hotel to ask if our old friend Mr Green is staying here."

"An' what are you going to say if he comes up and says he doesn't know you?" Mary enquired as she scrambled up the bank.

"Just say how sorry we are but he isn't our Mr Green after all," Peter laughed. "Once you start on a life of detection like this it's quite easy to keep it up... Come on, David. Let's get it over. And you twins behave yourselves and stay there till we come back. We won't be long, I promise."

They crossed the courtyard together and walked boldly into the hall. There was nobody there. The hotel was so quiet that they could hear the ticking of a clock.

"There must be an office," Peter whispered. "There's always an office. There it is."

David nodded and stepped forward down the carpeted corridor with Peter's hand on his arm. The office was empty but on the wall by the door was a green baize board, crisscrossed with black tape under which were a number of letters waiting to be collected by the hotel guests. Peter noticed this first and they were both examining the letters when a soft footstep behind them made them jump guiltily and turn round.

"And who might you be?" a grey-haired waitress said in a soft country voice. "Gave me quite a start, you did. 'Tis too early for tea. Don't serve teas in the lounge till four o'clock."

David pulled himself together.

"Good afternoon," he smiled. "You made us jump too. There doesn't seem to be anyone about and we want to enquire whether a friend of the family is staying here. We heard that he might be in Hexworthy and this is the only hotel, isn't it?"

"It is indeed. And who might you be looking for?"

David looked round. There was nobody else in sight but he kept his voice low as he replied.

"We wanted to know whether you have a gentleman staying here of the name of Green? It's a common name, I know, but he's small and generally

wears a tweed suit and a hat to match. He's keen on fishing I believe and that's why we thought he might be staying here."

Before the woman could answer, Peter, with what she believed to be a touch of genius, broke in:

"We looked for him down by the bridge at the bottom but he wasn't there."

"No. He wouldn't be there, midea. Of course I know the gentleman. Very pleasant he is."

"Is he in the hotel now?" David asked quickly.

The woman considered this and after a glance at Peter's eager face said, "I was just thinking, midea. He passed some remark at lunch about where he was going to fish and it wasn't down at Huccaby... Just let me think now."

They allowed her time to remember, praying that she would answer before Mr Green himself walked into the hotel and spoiled everything. Peter was feeling the strain and rather impatiently said, "Please! If he went fishing can you tell us where he went? Did he go off in his car?"

"Now I remember. Of course he said it as plain as plain. He shares his table with Mr Mintor and I heard him say that he was going off on his own up the Swincombe... No. He wouldn't take his car for that... 'Tisn't much more than a mile from here and if I know anything about these fishing gentlemen he won't be back till after six and he'll talk about his fishing all through dinner."

"Thank you very much," David said as he edged past her towards the door. "I think that's our Mr Green but we shan't wait for him."

"And shall I tell him who called to see him, midea?"

"No, thanks. We'll go and find him, but there's no need for you to mention that we called. We want to surprise him... Goodbye and thanks so much," and they managed to get out of the hotel without having to answer any more questions.

"We seem to be lucky, Pete," David remarked, "but I think we ought to see this Mr Green for ourselves."

"It's not a good time of day to find people in hotels. The twins are still out there, thank goodness. They were much too meek just now... Hello, twins. We've got good news. We know where he is."

The twins looked at each other meaningly.

"Why did you bother with us," Dickie said after a pause. "Anybody could have gone in there and asked where he was. Have you spoken to him?"

David flopped down on the grass beside them and pulled Jon's map from his pocket.

"Of course we haven't. He wasn't there. Anybody else come along?"

"No, David. We're feeling better now so long as we don't have to go on those old hired bikes again. Where's this man?"

"Fishing up the Swincombe. It's not so far, I'll just look it up on the map and then we'll go and find him... On foot. Not on the bikes. We'll save those for going home again."

Mary got up and felt herself tenderly.

"There's a car coming," she said. "Almost as beautiful an' superb as Mr Warrender's."

A smart, gleaming crimson car swept effortlessly up the hill and stopped just below them in the courtyard. Mackie cocked his ears as a tall, thin man with sandy hair and glasses got out and hurried into the hotel.

But a few minutes later he appeared in the porch with their talkative waitress beside him. They could hear her voice clearly.

" 'Tis funny you should be asking for Mr Green, sir. Those youngsters over there were asking for him only just afore you came along. He's up the Swincombe doing his fishing. Maybe that young man would show you the

way if you wanted him quickly like... Thank you very much, sir... Good afternoon, sir."

"Here we go," David whispered. "On guard, twins, and don't let yourselves go yet. Something is going to happen."

The stranger, after giving them a quick look, walked over and stood in the road below them. He was wearing a thick suit of rough brown tweed, suede shoes, and a sports shirt with a yellow spotted cravat at the neck. His face was thin and freckled and now that he was close enough they could see that he had a little, thin sandy moustache. When Jon asked about him later David guessed his age to be about forty.

Mary had her hand on Mackie's collar and felt him growling softly as the stranger smiled toothily.

"Good afternoon," he said pleasantly enough with a little bow towards Peter. "The woman over there tells me that you too have been enquiring for my friend Green. I wonder if he has ever spoken to me of you? Have you known him long?"

David thought hard.

"I think you've made a mistake, sir. We did ask at the hotel if a Mr Green was staying there and the waitress said he was fishing the Swincombe. When she told us what he looked like we were fairly sure he wasn't our Mr Green."

The man shaded his eyes from the sun as he looked up at them.

"I see you have a map there," he said to David. "I wonder if I might borrow it for a moment?"

"If you want to know how to get to the Swincombe I can tell you," David replied. "It's not more than half a mile from here but you can't use your car. The map shows a track over the top there."

"Well, come down and show me, boy," the stranger said, and although he still smiled there was a different edge to his voice. David winked at Peter, slithered down the bank and passed him the map.

"There you are, sir. There's the track. I wasn't trying to send you in the wrong direction."

"Would you care to sell me this map? Very foolishly I forgot to bring mine."

"Sorry, sir," David said as he quickly took it back again. "It isn't mine. I borrowed it. Shall we watch your car while you've gone? I dare say we shall be stopping here for tea."

The man glared, turned on his heel, walked back to the car and locked it.

"He's rude," Mary said loudly and clearly. "He didn't say 'Thank you'. Did you hear him not say it, twin?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I didn't. What a pity! I thought he was so kind and nice and that we'd made a new friend."

As soon as he was out of sight David turned to Peter. "What d'you think of that? You didn't have much to say, Pete?"

"You said it all. I don't like him, David. He was trying to be nice but it didn't come off. Fancy asking to buy the map! I suppose he's never been here before. I wonder how far he's come? He must want to see Mr Green badly."

"We'd better follow him and see if we can find them both," David suggested. "Come on, twins. If Mackie doesn't behave himself you'll have to put him on the lead. We may want him soon, and I don't want him dashing ahead and warning our victims. We want to catch them red-handed doing something suspicious."

The twins slithered down the bank and ran on ahead with Mackie between them.

"Of course he may really be fishing in the brook," Peter said. "He might really be here on holiday, but we do know that if he walks right up the river to its source he'd come to Dan's Secret Station. But he couldn't get as far as that in an afternoon, could he, David? And why should that man in the flashy car want to see him in such a hurry? It's odd, isn't it, David? We've only been here a day and now it looks as if the Lone Piners are mixed up in something again."

"We've got a nose for it," David laughed. "I wish the others were here. I'm curious about those two men... Come on. Let's see what's happening."

The rough track led them at first high up the moor, and it was not long before they were able to look down on the roofs and chimneys of the hotel and beyond that to the wooded valley of the Dart. At the top of the hill the twins, with Mackie panting on his lead, were waiting for them.

"We can see the Swincombe or whatever it's called from here," Dickie announced. "That sandy man is hurrying down the path."

"We're waiting for you 'cos if he turns round now he'll see us," Mary added. "He'll be in the wood in a sec."

Sure enough, the track ran down the other side of the hill into a small wood beyond which they could see the Swincombe river sparkling in the afternoon sunshine. On their left the desolate slopes of the Moor rolled up to the patch of bright green which Dan had told them guarded the Secret Station.

"Good idea, twins," David said as he sat down beside them. "I can't see him now but as we know where he's gone we'll soon catch him up... I'll just have another look at the map... See, Peter. Dan told us that track went up as far as a reservoir and we must be on it now. The map shows this little wood and then marks the track as a dotted line until it just fades out... No talking when we get to the wood and keep Mackie on the lead."

David went first, the others following in single file and soon they were standing on the edge of a stretch of turf not more than a hundred yards from the river. There was no sign of the two men.

"Which way now?" Peter whispered. "Shall I go with Mary down to where this river joins the Dart? It can't be far. You two boys could go upstream."

"But Sandy can't be far away," David persisted. "We were only a few minutes behind him. Let Mackie off, Mary."

Macbeth shook himself, looked round at them and wagged his tail. Although he had been panting and struggling for the last twenty minutes he now seemed reluctant to leave them.

"Let's just look round," Dickie suggested. "I feel like a detective."

Oddly enough he *did* find a clue. Upstream, on the river bank, he picked up an empty cigarette carton and came dashing back in triumph to David.

"There you are. It's new. Quite new. Only been there a little while. He's gone up that way."

"I remember now," Peter said. "That Sandy man's fingers were stained brown with cigarettes. It's one of the things I don't like about him... Come on. Let's go upstream. Put Mackie on the lead again."

The track led them away from the stream for a while, but after five minutes, Peter, who was in front, stopped and said quietly, "There they are."

Fifty yards away the Swincombe was splashing over a shallow fall into a pool on the banks of which were standing the sandy stranger and a short man in a round tweed hat. The first was smoking a cigarette and the other had a fishing rod in his hand. On the grass was an angler's basket and something which gleamed in the sun. They were talking hard and the taller man was waving an arm in emphasis, but the Lone Piners could not hear what they were saying above the fall of the water.

"That's rum," David said. "He's not fishing. He's just pretending... Now listen to me, twins. Our first job is to find out whether the little chap is Penny's Mr Green. If he is, then it will be your job to break up the party. When I'm sure that he's the same man I'll sneeze and you can go into action. Don't let them talk to each other privately, and if you make them very mad

they may give something away. Peter and I will be near but we'll leave this to you after I've given you the signal. All right?"

With wicked grins the twins nodded. This was an assignment after their own hearts.

Then Mackie barked a challenge and the two men looked round. Sandy stared at them but his companion stooped quickly and put something into the fishing basket and closed the lid.

"Looks like binoculars," Peter said. "He can't want those for catching fish - unless he's after minnows... David! He *looks* like the man Penny described. He does, you know. We've done it again, David."

"Go easy twins," David said quietly. "Be nice little children until I'm sure."

Now both men were watching them.

"Look nice and friendly, Pete," he went on. "I'm sure it's Green. He's commonplace enough and his nose is pointy and he's wearing shabby tweeds-----"

Suddenly Mackie barked furiously and dashed forward snarling. Tweed Hat backed away and pushed his companion in front of him.

"Take that dog away," he shouted in a shrill voice. "*Take it away*. It's dangerous. Tie it up."

"Come here at once, Mackie," David said sharply. "Be quiet and come here... Good boy," and he clipped his lead to his collar. "I'm very sorry, sir. I assure you he isn't dangerous. It's just that he doesn't know you... Forgive me asking, but are you Mr Green?"

Tweed Hat, whose nose seemed to be twitching with anxiety, stepped forward.

"And what is that to do with you, pray?"

Before David could answer Sandy snapped:

"You children told me up there that you knew Mr Green. What are you playing at?"

"Nothing, sir. No game at all. I can see now that this Mr Green is not the Mr Green my father knows. I've never met him before. Green is quite a common name. Is he the Mr Green you were looking for up at the hotel, sir?"

The sandy man's face coloured as he struggled to restrain his anger.

"Thank you, but I have nothing else to say to you. There is nothing else you can do to assist me. There is nothing to detain any of you here. Good afternoon."

Then Tweed Hat moved his hand and David saw a strip of pink sticking plaster across its back. He turned and smiled at Peter, at his brother and sister and then at the two men. Then he sneezed.

Dickie, with his hands in his pockets, stepped forward and smiled up at Tweed Hat.

"That's my big brother," he said. "He's rude. He hasn't innerduced us. My name is Richard Morton and this is my sister Mary. We're twins."

Then Mary smiled too.

"Soon as we saw you standing by the river I said to Dickie - he's my twin - that's a nice man who will teach us fishin'. I don't 'spect you'll b'lieve us, but the one thing we want to know about is fishin'. *Please* Mr Green, will you show us how to fish? Which end of that stick do you use?"

Sandy spluttered.

"Ridiculous children. Go away."

Mary gazed at him with wide-eyed horror.

"Ooooh! You don't mean *us*. Of course we're not goin' away. We've only just come. We *like* it here. Don't we, twin?"

"Yes we do. We like it, quite. I want Mr Green to teach me fishin'... Here we are in this nice place an' all the afternoon before us... I say, Mr Green. *Have you got any tea in that basket?* We're feelin' a bit peckish if you know what I mean. Just about this time we get a bit peckish-----"

"An' jew know what," Mary said brightly. "Jew know that we haven't brought neither bite nor sup with us this afternoon an'-----"

"*Brought what?*" the sandy man screamed. "Fantastic, ridiculous, abominable brats! *Get out!* Go away."

"Bite nor sup," Mary explained reasonably. "It means something to eat."

Ten yards away Peter and David were sitting in the heather. David, holding a struggling Mackie on his lead, looked quite serious. He was proud of the twins. They were doing well.

Dickie took his hands out of his pockets and took another step forward.

"Let me look at that stick thing, please? I shan't hurt it. I only want to twiddle it. Excuse me, Mr Green, but aren't you feeling well?"

Mr Green struggled to control himself. He pushed back his tweed hat and mopped his forehead. They noticed that his hair was grey and straggly and he was clenching and unclenching his fists.

"*Will you go away and take that yapping little beast with you?*"

"No, we won't," Dickie said briefly. "And we think you're rude. We only want to be friends. We like you. I want to see what you've got in that basket," and he stepped forward as if to open it.

Afterwards he maintained that he did intend to see what was inside but he never had the chance. Green lost his temper - for which he could hardly be blamed - grabbed the little boy by the shoulder and swung him round so that he stumbled and fell. Dickie was up in a flash and grabbed the fishing rod. Before he could defend himself with this, David released Mackie who

dashed happily into the fray. He made straight for Green like a little black bullet.

"*Keep him off,*" the frightened man yelled and fell backwards into the pool with a wonderful splash.

Mary flung herself on Mackie.

"Don't you dare touch me," she threatened the sandy man. "Mackie will kill you if you do... It's very rude to shout at us. We keep on telling you. And don't you touch my twin, either."

Green stood up with water dripping from his tweed suit. He was now white with rage.

"Listen, children," he said in a horrid, quiet, silky voice. "Just listen to me. I do not like dogs and I want you to go away and take the little doggie with you... If you will go now, at once, and put him on the lead and take him right away and not come back again I will give you both a nice present."

"How very kind you are," Mary said, with one eye on Sandy, who was lighting another cigarette with shaking fingers. "We knew you were nice when we first saw you, didn't we, twin?"

"Yes, we did... What sort of a present, Mr Green?"

Green took two steps towards the bank and Mackie snarled.

"A pound!" he said. "If you go away and take the dog."

"Oh no, thank you. We never do that sort of thing," Mary said with a wide-eyed smile. Then she sat on the bank and patted the grass beside her. "Come and sit by me, twin... It's very kind of you to offer us that money, Mr Green, but we're not going away. We like you so much that we're not even going to leave you. Wherever you go we'll go too, Mr Green."

Dickie sat down beside his sister while Mr Green stamped about in the water like a wild animal. But before anyone could speak there came from somewhere over their heads the throbbing roar of an engine. David and

Peter jumped up and looked up at the sky. Mary clasped Mackie tighter and watched Sandy. Dickie kept his eyes on Green and saw his expression change to one of keen interest as a helicopter came roaring over the tree tops of the little wood, passed above their heads and swept up the valley.

9. Enemies in the Air

David and Jon were still in bed next morning when Penny banged on their door.

"Got some news for you two. May I come in?"

"Come on then," Jon called. "And don't be too hearty. We can't bear it."

Penny bounced in and sat on the end of David's bed.

"Lazy brutes. It's nearly half-past eight."

"What's the fuss?" David groaned.

"Mother and Father have just told me that they're going off to Cornwall in the car for a few days. I'm not going with them because I know they'd rather be by themselves. They asked whether we would mind and whether I thought Donaldson would look after us. They're going to ask him presently. They'll only be away a few days. Considering what's happening, d'you think it's a good idea for us to be left here all unprotected with Donaldson?"

"You're not unprotected, Penelope," Jon said as he sat up in bed. "Go away now. We're going to get up. We'll have a talk in our room after breakfast."

And so, later that morning they all stood waving "Goodbye" to Mr and Mrs Warrender, and as the car moved out of sight Jon said, "Now what? We're on our own now and if we're going to find the Secret Station we'd better start as soon as possible. We can't all go, though, and as you haven't all heard how David got on with Dan last night we'd better have a check-up first. Shall we stop here or go back to the house?"

"Go back to our room," Penny said. "I don't think we should leave Donaldson alone in the house if we can help it. That man worries me and I've got some ideas about him too. We didn't have a chance to get things sorted out last night and anyway I'd like to hear again how the twins routed Green... Come on."

"Now," Penny said when they were settled, "let David tell us everything that happened after Dan telephoned last night. Jon told us that Donaldson was clearing up in the hall so that David had to say 'Lone Pine'. I bet that surprised Donaldson."

"If it did he didn't show it," Jon said. "That's the extraordinary thing about him. Sometimes he seems to be nosy and other times, like last night, he just doesn't care... Go on, David. Dan suggested meeting you at Two Bridges, didn't he? And it was your idea that we should hang about here."

David sat on the edge of the table.

"I'll tell you everything I told Dan and what he said because I didn't see you girls last night, but before I start I s'pose nothing special happened here, did it? Nothing that you girls didn't mention to Jon?"

"Don't think so," Peter said. "We all played Scrabble with Mr and Mrs Warrender after you'd gone out. Donaldson brought us tea before we went to bed about ten and we heard you come in just afterwards."

"Dan kept me a long time," David went on, "but Donaldson made me some tea too, when I came in. He did ask where I'd been and I said a bike ride on the Moor which was quite true. Otherwise he was pleasant enough... Anyway, Dan was waiting for me on the old bridge by the hotel. We left our bikes there and he took me along a path by the river which he said led to a wood of dwarf oak-trees called Wistman's Wood. Extraordinary place. We'll all go there one day. He hadn't anything to report, of course, but he was very bucked at what I'd got to tell him and that 'we were certain that Green was the same man that Penny and Jon saw at Rye. He was as puzzled as we are about the Sandy chap and at first he didn't believe me when I told him about the twins. He's never seen them in action but I must say again, Jon, that I was very proud of them. And so would you have been. It was all a very successful operation.

"Anyway, when I told Dan about the helicopter he was so excited that he couldn't keep still. I couldn't tell him much about it except that it was grey and neither Pete nor I saw how many people were in it. What we were sure of was that Green and the other chap had a shock when they saw it. Pete

and I were some yards away from them but Mary said - what did you say about them, Mary?"

"They were frightened. I think they wished they could hide from it."

"There you are," David went on. "They were scared. Anyway, I told Dan how we watched the thing go up the valley and then hover over the top. We didn't actually see it land but the noise of the engine stopped and so we're sure it landed on the roof of the station. Anyway it was all rather feeble after that. Green picked up his fishing rod and found that it was broken and danced with rage on the bits and then Sandy said, 'Better get back to the Lion...' We gave them twenty yards and then we followed them. When they stopped so did we and waited until they went on again. Of course we couldn't hear what they said, but when they got to the hotel, Sandy got straight into his car and drove off while Green went into the hotel."

"We waved to that Sandy man as he drove off," Dickie said, "but all he did was to bite his cigarette in half. We thought he was a silly man."

"Maybe not so silly," Jon said. "Well, nothing happened here while you were away. Donaldson didn't do anything suspicious but seemed rather amused at us hanging about watching him. Looked at us as if we were fools and we began to think that he was right. What does Dan suggest now?"

"He's sure that some of us ought to be watching Green all the time. He says he must be a spy and knew somehow that someone was trying out flying saucers on Dartmoor as well as on Dungeness. It's important that we find out more about him - whether he gets a lot of letters or collects his mail from another address, and what his relations are with the Sandy chap. He's certain he's a spy."

"What about Donaldson, then?" Penny said hotly. "I know that you all like him, but why has he really come here? Why? That's what I'd like to know. I'm sure he isn't what he appears. I've a good mind to challenge him."

Suddenly there was a quick knock on the door and as it opened they saw Donaldson standing there with a smile on his face. There was a long silence broken only by a gasp of surprise from Peter. Penny went white and was

about to say something impetuous but Jon gave her a warning look and spoke instead.

"Yes, Mr Donaldson? Did you want us?"

"Only to ask whether packed lunches are required today, Jonathan? I was thinking that, as it's a grand day, you'd probably all want to go out."

There was a slight emphasis on the "all" and Penny sensed immediately that he wanted them all out of the way. She had to think quickly.

"Oh, thank you very much," she said. "We were just coming down. Yes, please. We shall all be going out for the day."

"Very good. Sandwiches will be ready in half an hour."

As soon as the door had closed, Penny put her finger to her lips, ran over and put her ear against the panel. They all sat in surprised silence until she suddenly opened the door and looked out.

The corridor was empty.

"Sorry to be so dramatic," she said as she locked the door and came back. "I don't trust him. You ought to have locked it, Jon. He wants us all out of the way and I thought it was better for him to think that we were all going out. What shall we do?"

"We've got to be reasonable about this," Jon said, "but I'm sure that Green is a traitor and a spy. We're alone here now and we've got to make the most of today and find out what we can. Donaldson must be watched too, and we've promised Dan that some of us will go up and look at the Secret Station - go as near as we can, anyway."

"We like Mr Green," Mary murmured. "We like him so much that we promised we'd never leave him. We don't think he'll be surprised to see us again."

"Maybe he won't," David agreed. "But you've got to be careful. He's not a very nice man and whatever he's doing we've now begun to interfere with

his plans... This is what I think we'd better do and I hope you girls will agree. Will Penny and Peter be responsible for the twins today while Jon and I go up the Swincombe and see what's at the top? I suggest that Peter and Mary go over to Hexworthy and see what's happening there. If Green is not there and you can't find out where he is, telephone Penny, who will be waiting here with Dickie and keeping an eye on Donaldson... All right, Penny?"

"I've got something to say," Peter added. "I agree that we can't all go up to Swincombe and that it's too far for the twins, but have you thought that the Secret Station might be guarded by dogs who won't wait to ask whether you're Jon and David saving your country from traitors?"

"I had thought of it," David admitted, "but I think we've got to risk it. I don't believe guard dogs actually attack unless their master orders them to do so; but we shan't be such fools as to go close if it looks dangerous. We only want to look round. You do see how important it is, don't you?"

"Not really," Peter smiled. "I told you at the beginning that I don't like anything about these mysterious saucers and all that's going on round here. What really does interest me is helping Dan. I like him and if he wants a story I'm prepared to help him... You boys can go up there if you like. We can't stop you, but do be careful. We don't want to telephone Dan tonight and tell him that you've been carried away in a helicopter, although, come to think of it, I s'pose that would make a good story... If you're going you'd better start as soon as possible. Let's go down now and see if the sandwiches are ready."

A quarter of an hour later they all went down to the river with Jon and David to see them off. Donaldson had been in excellent humour as he packed up the lunches, but he asked several times where they were going and why they were going separately. They considered themselves rather clever in evading a direct answer. At the stepping stones the two boys crossed the river, turned and waved, and then in single file set off along the track leading to the junction of the Swincombe and the Dart.

It was a still, hot morning with the hill tops hidden in a haze. On their left the Dart ran cool and inviting over its bed of polished pebbles and soon

they came to its junction with the Swincombe river, which they crossed by a narrow plank bridge. Once over they turned to the right and were able to look right up the valley.

"Too misty to see the bog," Jon said. "Wonder if the helicopter will be over again? And I wonder whether they ever try these little saucers in the daytime? I've been thinking about this a lot, David. I think they're miniature prototypes and as they can't have anyone in them they must be guided by radio. Do they come back, I wonder? Where do they go? Outer space maybe, and it might be years before they return."

"Oh, well," David said irreverently. "Let's get going and see the works! I hope Peter's idea about guard dogs is only a poor guess. It won't be long before we come to yesterday's battlefield and after that it's all strange country," he went on. "The map doesn't show much except a small reservoir. Not even the track is marked. It will take us at least two hours to get to the top."

After half an hour's steady walking they reached the reservoir where the river had been dammed and there the path stopped.

"That proves it," Jon said. "Unless there's a track down the Moor on the south side their only way of getting in supplies is by helicopter. Can you imagine what it's like up here in the winter?"

They stood for a moment feeling the silence and utter loneliness of the Moor.

"I wouldn't care to spend much time up here alone," David admitted, "and I shan't like it now if the weather changes. It's getting dull. We'd better get on."

As soon as a bend in the valley hid the reservoir the character of the country changed again. The river was only about six feet wide and their path little more than a sheep track. The valley narrowed. There was no more bracken. Great, grey rocks, weathered by centuries of sun, frost and rain thrust themselves out of the steep hillsides. Clumps of spiky rushes and patches of vivid, green moss marked the birth of innumerable trickling streams and the

uncanny silence was broken by their tinkling. The ground was soft and spongy under their heavy shoes as they climbed steadily up the valley towards the unknown. The higher they struggled the steeper became the rocky walls of the valley until a sharp turn brought them to the entrance of a narrow gorge about two hundred yards long.

"We're nearly up!" David said triumphantly.

Jon did not answer but gripped his arm fiercely.

"Get down," he whispered. "Lie flat. Don't move. I saw something move up there."

David fell beside him, realizing that they had precious little cover as there was quite a long path of grass along this side of the tiny stream.

"Now look!" Jon whispered as he pointed to the other side of the ravine. "Sun flashing on something bright. I swear I saw something move."

Even as he spoke they heard the now familiar throbbing of a helicopter engine. They waited tensely, their bodies pressed to the damp ground but straining their necks to see from which direction the machine would come. It came from their right. Fast. Suddenly it was overhead and then it swung to the south and disappeared over the top of the ravine.

"Don't move, Jon. It might come back... That's not the helicopter we saw yesterday! I'm sure of it. The other was grey. This was a different colour. It may sound crazy but I don't believe it's British... Listen now. It's circling."

"Over the Station, of course... Look out. It's coming back."

They crouched down again as the 'copter sailed over the ravine. Then they saw a man, about sixty yards on the other side, standing on a narrow ledge. As the helicopter passed almost directly overhead he swung round holding something to his face.

"He's got a camera," Jon whispered. "He's trying to get a picture of it. Not Green, is it? I'm sure it's not. This chap is bigger. Different clothes, too, and

black hair so far as I can see... *Look out, David.* Keep down. The 'copter is coming down."

It seemed as if the man in the machine had suddenly noticed the man with the camera, for it swooped down at him menacingly. Then the stranger, as if realizing that he was being threatened, moved sideways, toppled over the edge and rolled down to the rocks at the bottom of the ravine. At the same moment a ladder was let down from the 'copter and a man in dark overalls, carrying something which might have been a revolver in one hand, came down a few steps as the machine hovered over the little ledge from which the photographer had fallen.

David gasped with surprise, and then jumped up shouting, "Come on, Jon, we'd better see what's happening," as he ran forward.

Feeling rather dazed and wondering if it would not have been more sensible to wait and watch rather than interfere, Jon followed him. The man on the ladder saw them, looked up, shouted something they could not hear and climbed up into the machine which rose several hundred feet, hovered over the gorge and then flew off to the south again.

Meanwhile the two boys clambered down their side of the ravine, which was not so steep as the other, and David was the first to reach the man lying limply, face down, a few feet from the stream. One leg was crumpled under him and he made no answer when they stooped over him.

They looked at each other in horrified silence and then David said, "He's only unconscious. Looks as if his ankle is twisted or broken. Help me turn him over."

"Seen him before?" Jon asked and David shook his head.

"It's not Green nor the Sandy bloke. Look at him! He's filthy."

He certainly was. He was wearing brown corduroy trousers, heavy brown shoes and an anorak over an open-necked shirt. His clothing was covered in dried mud and he looked as if he had not shaved for days.

"He's breathing," David said with relief.

Jon looked up to the ledge from which the stranger had fallen.

"Look at that, David. Looks like the entrance to a sort of cave or tunnel. I believe this chap has been living in it. Shall I nip up and see?"

Then they realized that the helicopter was overhead again. David raised a white face.

"Don't move, Jon. They're watching us. Those devils were after him. They'd have got him too if we hadn't run out. Don't move. They're coming down."

Each hoped that the other did not realize how scared he was as the helicopter hovered above them. Neither of the boys made any sign but probably because the unconscious man lay still the helicopter zoomed away over the ravine again.

"Climb up to the top now and have a look," David said. "We'd better know whether they're going to land at the Secret Station."

Jon scrambled up to the top of the ravine but there was no sign of the helicopter in the haze which was settling over the moor again. Neither could he see any buildings, but he guessed that the Station was hidden by yet another rise in the ground beyond the bog.

When he got down again David was throwing water into the man's face. He stirred, opened his eyes, groaned and then closed them again.

"Suppose he's another enemy spy?" Jon whispered. "Could be, you know. Feel in his pockets and see if he's got a weapon. If he has, take it. We shall have to get him to the Secret Station or else down to King's Holt. We can't leave him here."

David nodded and felt the outside of the stranger's pockets.

"Nothing here. Have a look at that burrow of his, Jon, and see if there's anything there which tells us who he is. Might be as well to know before he really comes to. He'll be all right soon."

Jon nodded and climbed the side of the ravine again. His guess had been a good one. A small cave about four feet wide and nearly as high had been tunnelled into the side of the ravine. Inside was a sleeping bag, binoculars, a small oil stove and a kettle, a torch and a rucksack which looked as if it contained food. There was also a flat flask in a metal case which Jon guessed correctly to contain brandy. He took the torch and crawled right into the cave, but there was nothing to suggest the stranger's identity; no maps nor notebooks, and no papers unless they were in the rucksack which he was reluctant to search.

Then he heard David calling and backed out with the brandy flask.

"He's coming round, Jon. Better come down," and after a few minutes as he took the brandy he added, "Find anything exciting? Do you know who he is?"

Jon shook his head. "He's well fitted up in there. Everything except a radio and a brass plate with his name on it."

David lifted the man's head and poured some of the brandy between his lips. He spluttered, gulped, groaned and sat up.

"Who are you? How did you get up here and what's happened to that helicopter?"

"You remember that, do you?" David asked. "We're just out exploring and happened to be up there on the other side when the 'copter came over. We saw you fall, but when we ran forward to see if we could help, a man who was coming down on a ladder changed his mind and went up again. He didn't look very friendly. The 'copter came back soon after, had a good look at the three of us and then went off south."

"Now listen carefully," the man said, between teeth clenched with pain. "The men in that machine are after me. I can't explain now, but I've got to get out quickly with the pictures in my camera. They didn't steal that, did they? Have you seen it about? Must have dropped it when I fell. You've got to help me find that camera first, boys. I can't tell you what it's worth."

He moved and groaned again and then felt his ankle while they stood back and watched him. They were very puzzled. He had a pleasant, educated voice but they could not place him.

"Who are you?" Jon asked abruptly. "Never mind about your camera now. Why are you living in that cave?"

The stranger looked at the brandy flask still in David's hand.

"So you've found that, have you? That story is too long to tell you now. Those men will be back soon to see what's happened to us. It's not safe for me to stay up here or for you either if they know you're helping me. You'll have to help me because I've twisted this ankle. Give me a hand and I'll see what I can do with it."

They helped him up. He was very pale and although they could see that he was in great pain he assured them that his ankle was not broken.

"I can get along if you'll help me, but I shan't get far by myself. I've got to find the camera and I must get away. This is serious."

"Where do you want to go? I suppose the Secret Station is the nearest?" Jon said.

"What do you know about that?" the stranger asked sharply.

"Nothing much," David admitted. "We've heard about it and were on our way to have a look round. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

The man put his hand on Jon's shoulder and took the weight off his ankle.

"Are you two staying at King's Holt?" he asked quietly and they were so astonished that they could only nod.

"Very well, then. Take me there, please. I can only tell you now that you'll be doing a wonderful job. *But we've got to hurry.* Look for the camera first. I must have that."

David was so surprised that he could only nod to Jon and together they began to search among the heather and rocks while the man sat down again with his head in his hands. The boys had no chance to talk together because David found the camera almost at once. It was a very expensive miniature and seemed undamaged.

"All right," he called. "I've got it," and put it in his pocket.

"I'm grateful," the man said. "Now we can get going. Hand it over, young man."

"I don't think I'll do that yet," David said stoutly. "You haven't told us who you are - in fact, you haven't told us anything. We'll help you because you are hurt and in danger, but I'm going to keep the camera."

The man smiled for the first time and they could not help liking him.

"All right, boy. You can carry it, but if you have to go on by yourselves I'll tell you where you must take it. Maybe it's not a bad idea for me not to have it. We don't know what's going to happen."

With this the boys had to be satisfied and they began their long, arduous journey down the valley. They were in sight of the reservoir when David stopped suddenly.

"What a fool I've been," he gasped. "It's only just dawned on me and I've been puzzling about it for hours... That man on the helicopter ladder. I believe I've seen him before. I believe I saw him yesterday at the White Lion. He was asking for a Mr Green who is staying at the hotel and we told him where to find him. I can't be positive because he wasn't very close and was wearing mechanics overalls, but I believe it's the same man. P'raps you know him and Mr Green too? Why don't you tell us your name?"

"Better call me Brown," the stranger smiled. "Sorry to be so mysterious, but we'll look after Mr Green presently. You've got to trust me and get me and the camera safely to your place. Perhaps we can talk then."

They had passed the reservoir now and were on the wider track, when they heard the helicopter again.

"Down in the heather," Brown gasped. "Don't move. Don't let them see you."

And while they flattened themselves against the friendly ground they realized that a cold, grey mist was swirling round them. The throbbing of the helicopter died away and Brown sat up.

"This happens sometimes on the Moor. Only advantage is that they can't see us now. Let's get on, although I don't think I can go much farther."

The next half-hour was a nightmare. The mist was sometimes so thick that they could not see more than a few yards. At other times it swirled away and for a few moments they saw ahead of them the ghostly shapes of trees. Only the sound of the running water and their own heavy breathing broke the silence. They passed the pool into which Green had fallen and were near the track which led through the wood to Hexworthy when Brown sagged against them and slipped to the ground.

"He's fainted," Jon said. "If you've still got the brandy give him some more."

They kneeled beside him and lifted his head. David forced some more of the spirit through his clenched teeth. He gasped and opened his eyes.

"Now listen, lads," he whispered. "I can't go farther until I've had a good rest. I want one of you now to go on ahead to King's Holt with the camera. Just get it there. Hide it till I come and tell you what to do with it."

"But why?" David pleaded. "We can't leave you like this. And we want to know what all this mystery is about?" The fog swirled round them again. They were alone in a grey, phantom world as Brown said, "You must believe that the men in that helicopter are the enemies of your country and they would give anything for the undeveloped negatives in that camera. Please do as I say."

But before they could answer there came through the mist the eerie, thin whining of a flying saucer.

Jon jumped to his feet and stared upwards, "And now I can't see it!" he cried as Brown, too, tried to raise himself. "The luck of it!"

"You've got to get back to King's Holt now," Brown gasped and then, as the whining died away, they heard faintly through the mist the sound of a dog's bark.

10. Where's Dickie?

Just after breakfast on the morning of the same day on which Jon and David saved the man from his enemies in the helicopter, Mr Green was sitting in his bedroom in the White Lion looking at a letter which had just arrived for him by the morning post. The postmark was Plymouth and the address written in rough capitals. The single sheet of paper inside had been torn from a cheap pad and the message, in the same rather obviously disguised printing, had been written with a ballpoint pen. It was rather an odd message for a little, middle-aged man on holiday to receive but it seemed to mean something to him. This is what he read: NO NEED TO PROLONG HOLIDAY AS AUNT EDITH ARRIVES WITHOUT FAIL TONIGHT. SUGGEST THAT CONTACT WITH OUR LONELY FRIEND IS FIRST ESSENTIAL. HE MUST NOT MEET EDITH BUT WOULD DOUBTLESS ENJOY YOUR COMPANY.

His face was expressionless as he read the message a second time. Then he put his cold pipe in his pocket, walked over to the dressing-table and picked up the ashtray. After reading his letter for the third time, he placed it on the ash-tray and lit it with his lighter. Still expressionless, he watched the paper burn away and then crumpled the ashes between his fingers and tipped them out of the window. Next he packed his few clothes into a shabby suitcase, searching every drawer and cupboard to ensure that he had left nothing behind. When he was certain, he fastened the suitcase, unlocked the door and went down again to the reception desk.

"I am sorry, but I shall be leaving this afternoon. I have packed and the porter may bring my bag down when he wishes."

"Oh, Mr Green. I'm sorry. We shall miss you. I hope you didn't have bad news in your letter?"

"That," he said with a sudden edge to his voice, "that is an impertinent question... Please ask the cook to prepare me sandwiches as I may be going out with my rods shortly. And please have my bill ready for me."

He strode down the hall and walked round to the lock-up garages. Just before he turned off the road he looked down the hill and saw two girls pushing bicycles. The bigger of the two had fair plaits and the other child was undoubtedly one of the twins who had tormented him yesterday. Then he saw their Scottie dog and as he turned away he thought that Mary waved.

He hurried down to the garage, bolted the doors behind him and stood in the gloom for a minute biting his fore-finger. He was genuinely puzzled about these children and could not understand why they should be interested in him. What was even more unpleasant was the fact that he and his companion of yesterday had failed to get the better of them, and that if today they chose to follow him they could, perhaps without realizing it, upset some very important plans. He turned the ignition key and noticed with satisfaction that the petrol tank was half-full. They certainly could not follow him far if he used the car, but the trouble was that the car would not help him to find Aunt Edith. As he got out he heard a dog snuffling under the closed door, and when he moved the eager sniffing changed to an angry barking. Mr Green did not like this.

Then he heard a girls clear voice. "Come here at once, Mackie. Don't be so silly... COME HERE!"

The girl with the plaits! He could not spend the rest of the day locked up inside a garage so he slipped back the bolts and stepped out.

"Good morning," Peter smiled. "We thought it was you when we were coming up the hill... *Stop it, Mackie!*... I'm so sorry about him, Mr Green. How are you this morning? None the worse for your wetting, I hope?"

"I'm extremely well, thank you, but don't you dare let that dog go. Keep him on the lead. He's not safe."

He decided to be pleasant. Better to have them on his side if he could. He wondered what had happened to the girl twin.

Peter, tugging on Mackie's lead, was still smiling in a friendly way when Mary came running round the corner from the hotel.

"Hello, Mr Green," she said with a radiant smile. "Here we are again 'cept my twin and the others who have gone off on other jobs... How are you today? Dickie an' me were ever so sad when you ran into the pool 'cos we weren't quite sure whether you did it deliberate!"

Mr Green blinked, gritted his teeth and then tried to force a smile to his face.

"Your little doggie forced me in," he said in a choky sort of voice, "but I am none the worse, thank you."

"We are glad. When the lady in the hotel told me you were going away we were so very, very sorry. Acksherley we wanted to ask you again whether you'd teach us to fish. If you couldn't spare the time to teach two of us, p'raps you could just teach me. Then I could teach Dickie."

"I don't think I could do that this morning," he said, wondering what she was going to say next and with one eye still on the growling Mackie. "There is not much of my holiday left, you see."

Although Green could escape in his car as a last resort he was wondering if there was any way in which he could persuade these children to help him to carry out the unpleasant orders which he had just received. Somehow or other he had got to persuade a man known to be watching the Secret Station to leave his post before evening. He looked at Peter again and could not help liking her and yet he had seen her laughing at him yesterday. She looked honest - there was, in fact, something disconcerting about her steady eyes as she smiled at him and asked:

"If you're not going fishing today, Mr Green, what are you going to do on your last day? We really did come over to see you and rather hoped that Mackie would be more friendly."

"How can you possibly be interested in my movements, young lady. Where do you come from? Are you staying near here?"

"Yes, we are," Peter admitted. "We're with friends who have taken that big house called King's Holt just off the main road. We're doing a lot of

exploring round here."

"And what sort of places do you explore?"

"Well," Peter said candidly, "we did hear that there are some mysterious buildings on the top of the Moor. Something secret going on up there. Have you heard anything like that, Mr Green?"

This was extraordinary! The girl seemed to have no guile, but would she know anything about the Station? Suddenly he made up his mind to get rid of them now and, at all costs, keep them away from the Swincombe.

"I shouldn't believe any silly stories like that," he said, rather ponderously. "Ridiculous nonsense, of course. I shan't go for a walk this morning but will take the car into Princetown. I wonder if you two would like to come? An ice cream in a cafe perhaps might be acceptable?"

"Very asseppable," Mary said promptly. "That's a very good idea."

But Peter sensed a trap. She did not like the idea of getting into Green's car. Once there, anything might happen and he could drive them miles away and leave them stranded on the moor.

"I'm sorry we can't accept your invitation," she said. "It's very kind of you as Mary says, Mr Green, but we've come over on bicycles with Mackie in the bike basket. Of course we *could* leave the bikes here and collect them when you bring us back but I'm afraid we couldn't leave the dog and he's not behaving very well with you, is he?"

"Very well," he said. "What will you do now, then?"

"We may explore the brook where we saw you yesterday," Peter replied, "but we'd like to say goodbye to you before you leave Devon, wouldn't we, Mary?"

"Of course we would. We'll come back this afternoon just to see you off."

This was more than he could stand and, for a few seconds, he forgot that he was trying to be pleasant. He turned on his heel, went back to the garage

and started the car. As he drove up to the road and turned down the hill he saw, in his driving mirror, the two girls waving to him. He would have been even more surprised if he could have seen Peter rush into the hotel as soon as he was out of sight.

Luckily there was no one in the telephone box. Breathlessly she rammed the coins into the slot and asked, after a maddening delay from the operator, for the King's Holt number.

Her heart sank as Donaldson answered. "I want to speak to Penny - Miss Warrender, please. It's urgent. I know she's there."

Donaldson asked her to hold on, and then Penny's excited voice answered.

"Listen, Pen. I haven't time to tell you everything. Is he listening? Trying to, I mean."

"I expect so, but if he is I can't say more, can I? What's happened?"

"Green has escaped in his car. It's a black Austin and the number is VP 6480. He said he was driving into Princetown and offered to take us in for an ice. He's leaving today but I'm sure it's important for us to know whether he really is going to Princetown. If he is he'll be passing the end of the drive in about ten minutes. Will you or Dickie run down now and see whether he goes by? If he does, I'm sure some of us ought to follow him if we can, although he wants to get rid of us. He's looking a very worried little man this morning... I'll ring you back in a quarter of an hour and if you say 'Lone Pine' I'll know that you've seen Green and we'll come back right away... 'Bye."

When she came out into the fresh air again Mary and Mackie were waiting for her by the courtyard wall.

"This isn't much fun any more, Peter," Mary said as she tickled the little dog behind the ears. "He's gone to Princetown to guzzle ices without us and what shall we do until he comes back?"

"P'raps he won't come back, Mary. I know he hadn't any luggage in the car, but p'raps he's escaping. I've asked Penny and Dickie to see if he passes the end of the King's Holt drive and promised to ring up again soon."

"Why didn't you want us to go in the car with him?" Mary persisted.

"I don't trust him, Mary. He might have taken us anywhere. Might have kidnapped us."

"Not with Mackie. He wouldn't have dared... Did you speak to Dickie? I'd like to speak to him next time. I'm sorry, Peter, but I'm feelin' bored."

So was Peter now but they sat on the bank for another ten minutes and then Peter said:

"You can come into the telephone box with me, Mary, but you mustn't interrupt."

Penny answered this time:

"I sent Dickie, but he hasn't come back. I didn't think I ought to leave him alone here. He might have been wheedled, if you know what I mean. Give me the hotel 'phone number. I'll ring back and ask for you as soon as Dickie comes... 'Bye."

That did not make things any easier and for some reason Peter was worried. Dickie ought to have been back, and now it was particularly awkward for her because she would have to wait at the White Lion for the telephone to ring. She tried not to show Mary her anxiety and went to make friends with the girl in the desk, who did not seem to mind who used the telephone. Peter tried a few casual questions about Mr Green, but soon found that she did not intend to discuss the hotel guests with strangers. Mary passed the time by introducing Mackie to an old gentleman. At last the telephone rang. Peter dashed into the box, closed the door firmly and lifted the receiver.

"Is that you, Pete? It's Penny here. Listen, Peter. Something has happened to Dickie. He didn't come back so I ran to the end of the drive... He's not there. He's not anywhere. He's disappeared."

There was an edge of panic in her voice and Peter did her best to calm her.

"Of course he hasn't disappeared. Maybe he's hiding."

"No he isn't. He wouldn't be so stupid. Come back at once... No. I don't care what Donaldson says or does. Of course he doesn't know that Dickie is lost, but he keeps asking when we're going out. He wants to get rid of us, Pete. Wants us out of the way. Hurry."

A short while later Peter and Mary came within sight of the clump of trees above the drive of King's Holt and saw Penny waiting for them. "Where's Dickie?" Mary said sharply. "You're looking worried, Penny. What's happened to my twin?"

"I don't know," Penny said. "He came out here to see if Green drove past and didn't come back... What shall we do, Peter?"

Mary answered first.

"That man Green has kidnapped him. We've got to go after him."

11. The Mystery of Donaldson

Back on the moor, with the mist swirling round them and the thin whine of yet another flying saucer teasing their ears, Jon and David stared accusingly at the man they had rescued, as he lay back exhausted in the heather.

"You heard that, didn't you?" David demanded. "Do you know what it is? Why don't you tell us the truth?"

Brown struggled to sit up.

"Can't you see that I've had enough?" he snapped. "I've got to rest here for a while."

"But that whining noise? It comes from the Secret Station, doesn't it? Why don't you trust us and tell us what you were doing up there? We've got to know if you want us to help you."

"I've already told you that you'll be helping your country if you help me. I heard a dog bark just now. There are people about. One of you boys has got to get my camera back to King's Holt. It mustn't be left with me or with you if you stay here. I keep trying to warn you that you're not safe out on the moor. There's somebody after me."

Jon looked at him speculatively. In spite of the man's pleas and of what he had told them, Jon was not sure that they could trust him. The truth was that events were moving too quickly for them. He took off his glasses and polished them, as he always did when he was worried, and then looked down at Brown again. The man met his eyes steadily. He certainly looked in poor shape.

"Look here, Mr Brown," Jon said. "You know you said you wanted to get to King's Holt. It can't be more than a mile away. Can you make it now if we both carry you? Even if the helicopter comes over again they won't see you in this mist and the truth is that neither David nor I want to split up. Why don't you tell us the truth?"

Before Brown could answer they heard again the barking of a dog. Much nearer this time.

David laughed, put his finger to his mouth and whistled.

"It's Mackie," he shouted. "Here, Mack! Here, boy! We're up here," and then he gave a very different kind of whistle - the long mournful cry of the peewit which was the Lone Piners' secret call to each other. Faintly through the blanket of fog came the answer - "Peeee-wit. Peeee-wit."

And then, splashing through the shallows of the rushing stream, his shaggy coat soaked and muddy, came Macbeth, yelping with excitement.

"The others must be here," Jon shouted. "Penny! Where are you? PENNEEE!"

Again came the peewit's haunting cry and, "You're all right now, Mr Brown," he went on. "Those are our friends. We'll soon get you and your precious camera to King's Holt. There's nothing more for you to worry about."

"Isn't there?" Brown said grimly. "That's all you know. Help me up again."

As David gave him a hand Jon shouted over his shoulder, "Stay with him, David. I'll fetch the others. Don't move," and disappeared into the mist. He was not as good at the peewit's cry as the others, but he tried again and again as he pounded down the side of the stream. Suddenly it was answered a few yards away and there was Penny, breathless, and pushing back her red hair with one hand while she held out her other to him as he nearly blundered past.

"Jon! What's wrong? You look awful! Was that you making that ghastly noise like a half-strangled peewit?"

"Don't be funny!" he gasped. "Are you all right?... Are you all O.K.?... Did you hear the saucer again?... And the helicopter?... Did you see the 'copter?"

Penny's eyes widened. "We're all right, Jon, but glad to see you... The others are back there. They're coming. Have you got Mackie? He dashed ahead."

Jon grinned and then unexpectedly put his arm round her shoulders.

"Good! We've got Mackie and we've run right into an amazing adventure... Found a chap hiding in a cave he's dug for himself, rescued him from crooks in the 'copter and now he's twisted his ankle and can't walk and we've got to get him back to the house right away... Can't tell you more now, except that we don't want you to ask him any questions. Just accept him for the present until we can explain everything. Will you go back for the others and warn them, Penny? I should go back to David as I'm not too keen on leaving them together. D'you mind? We're not far up the track."

"All right," she said without arguing. "I can hear them now. See you soon," and she turned and ran back the way she had come.

Jon walked back slowly. The mist seemed to be clearing and in a few minutes he heard David's voice.

"The most difficult part will be the stepping stones, but we'll get you across, Mr Brown. Shall we make a start now? Hello, Jon! All O.K.?"

"So Penny says. They'll be here in a sec. Go and find them, Mackie."

Macbeth trotted off obediently and Brown smiled.

"Nice little dog that... Sorry to be such a nuisance but I'm better for that break. I haven't really said how grateful I am to you both. I'd have been in a poor way without you."

They liked him better for that, but hardly had time to say anything before the girls and Dickie arrived - the latter looking particularly smug.

David introduced them. "These are our friends."

Brown, standing on one leg, smiled.

"So you're all staying at King's Holt? Quite a party. I'm sorry not to be more presentable, but I didn't expect such an escort."

"You haven't *broken* your ankle, have you?" Penny asked. "Sure? Sit down on the bank here and we'll bind it again with my scarf. You can't get much of a grip with a handkerchief, can you?"

Then the girls took charge. The ankle was swollen but did not seem to be broken, so Penny soaked her green scarf in the brook and bound it tightly round the swelling. While this was going on Dickie was talking in a hoarse whisper to the boys a few yards away.

"I'm jolly well going to tell you what's happened to me. All sorts of things have happened to us twins before, but what's happened to me today is terrific. I bin kidnapped. Yes, I have. I bin kidnapped in a car and run off with and rescued by the other Lone Piners - 'cept you two, of course."

"Acksherley," Mary said, "what he says is true. He was kidnapped without me 'cos I wasn't there, but we *did* rescue him. Honest we did, David, and if you'll just pay attenshun we'll tell you."

"Not now, Mary, please," David hissed. "We don't want Mr Brown to hear what you've been doing. You can tell us when we get back to the house. Jon and I want to hear all about it, but not now."

"Oh well," Mary sighed with a glance at Brown's back. "We s'pose you know best, but it's funny how we keep collecting strange men of different colours."

Brown was in much less pain now and hobbled along quite well with the boys' help. They had almost reached the junction of the Swincombe and the Dart when the mist began to clear.

"Once we're over the bridge we shan't be long," Peter said cheerfully. "How's it going, Mr Brown? P'raps you'd like a rest on the bridge?"

But he had to wait for the rest for which he had hoped because at that moment Mr Green walked out of the vanishing mist and stopped in

astonishment when he saw them. With a wild war-cry Mackie bounded forward and Mary flung herself at him in vain. Green was carrying a stick and as the little dog rushed at him he swung it wildly. He could have done nothing worse. Mackie did not like Green and had not intended to attack him, but no little dog with the blood of Scottish ancestors in his veins could be threatened with a stick without retaliating.

"Keep him off!" Green shouted. "Dangerous little brute... *Get out!*"

Dickie ran forward as David shouted to Mackie, who was prancing warily round his victim, and forcing him slowly nearer and nearer to the bank of the Dart. Down on his front legs he crouched with tail wagging furiously. Growls rumbled in his throat as he dodged the blows from the man's heavy stick.

"Put that stick away, Mr Green," Dickie shouted. "He gets very, very angry with people with sticks... MACKIE! STOP IT... COME HERE."

Mackie's tail wagged even faster when he heard his small master's voice, and for a moment he took his eyes from his enemy and turned to look at Dickie. And at that moment Green hit him across the back. With a startled yelp of pain Mackie launched himself at the bully. Jon stayed with Brown, but the others ran forward shouting as, for the second time in twenty-four hours, Green stumbled and fell backwards with a resounding splash into the water. Mackie followed *him* in and David followed him and dragged him out by his collar. Wet though he was, Mary swept him into her arms and shed tears on his shaggy coat.

"He *lashed* at you when you weren't looking, my poppet... You can *kill* him when he comes out."

David and Dickie were standing on the bank as Green, with livid, working face stood up in the water. His stick had been swept away and the stones were slippery under his stumbling feet. His lips moved but no words came.

"You asked for that, Mr Green," David said. "I'm sorry, but if you hadn't hit him he'd have been all right... Let me help you," and he stepped into the water and held out his hand.

"Get out!" Green grumbled. "Get out, all of you. Leave me alone," and then he seemed to see Brown for the first time. For a long minute the two men stared at each other and then Dickie said, "Mary told us you were going away today. We wanted to say 'Goodbye' to you but now we don't care. I hope you're going somewhere where there's lots of little helpless dogs waitin' to be beaten by brave Mr Greens. We were goin' to walk back to Hexworthy with you, but now we don't care where you go."

"You'd better go before Mackie kills you," Mary panted as the little dog struggled in her arms.

But Green's eyes were fixed on Brown who was now resting on the narrow plank ridge. Everything had gone wrong from the moment these wretched children had arrived. How much did they know he wondered? What chance had he now to deal with "Aunt Edith"? He looked away and David knew that he was a beaten man.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get going. Give me Mackie's lead, Mary, and I'll fix it. Hold on tight to him."

Brown gave the other man a last quizzical look and then put his arm round Jon's shoulders again.

"Let's go," he said. "Nothing to stay for."

He seemed much refreshed by his rest, but their progress was very slow. Once they stopped and looked back to the bridge and their last look of Mr Green was as he stood dripping on the bank of the river. He was not even looking after them.

The mist had nearly disappeared now and there were glimpses of blue sky over Swincombe Tor. It was impossible to believe, as Jon most certainly did, that they were on the brink of great events. Only the sound of running water broke the silence. And yet, less than an hour ago, the peace of the Moor had been shattered first by the roar of the helicopter and then by the thin whine of the mysterious saucer. And on the hilltops behind them were the buildings of the Secret Station which none of them had yet seen.

Jon and David carried Brown across the river. In the deepest part the water swirled to their waists, but they managed to get over without dropping him. While resting again Brown asked for his camera.

"I can't run away now. Surely you see that? I've told you how valuable it is and I'd like to take charge of it now."

This was reasonable enough so David handed it over and then they started on the last stage of their journey.

The back door of King's Holt was locked so they limped round to the front door. That door was locked too and there was no sign of Donaldson. Penny tugged at the iron handle of an ancient bell-pull and as they stood, crowded together in the porch, they heard the bell jangling in the kitchen.

"Well!" said Dickie. "We've never tried that, twin. We must have a go some time!"

Then they heard footsteps crossing the stone-flagged hall and the door was unlocked and flung back.

David was standing next to Brown supporting him and he was the first to see Donaldson's face. For a second he saw astonishment and recognition in the man's eyes as he looked at Brown. Then the mask came down again and he was the courteous Donaldson they knew.

"We found this man on the moor," Jon said. "His ankle is badly hurt. Will you help us, please?"

"And could we have some tea," Penny asked as she and Peter stepped into the hall. "And would it be a lot of trouble if we had it in our room upstairs! We'd like it there very much because we've got such a lot to talk about."

Donaldson glanced again at Brown and rather meaningfully said, "No trouble at all, miss. And if we can help this gentleman up to the bathroom I'm sure we can make him very much more comfortable. Would you care for me to telephone for a doctor?"

Brown seemed to be struggling to hide a smile although he looked pale and ill.

"Doctor for me? I don't think so, thanks. These young friends have been a tremendous help, but your bathroom and some hot water would be very acceptable."

After he and Jon had helped Brown up the stairs, Donaldson opened the door of the Lone Piners' room.

"I'll just see what the gentleman wants," he said. "And then I'll bring your tea up."

The girls went in first and David, last, said over his shoulder to Brown, "We'll all be in here. Just call out if you want anything. We're going to have tea when it's ready."

Then Donaldson slammed the door and to their horror they heard the key turned from the outside.

They were locked in.

12. Penny in Danger

While the others stood open-mouthed with astonishment, David tugged at the handle of the locked door and then, in fury, banged on the panels with his fist.

"Donaldson!" he shouted. "What are you doing? Let us out... UNLOCK THE DOOR!"

Then Jon stepped forward.

"Go easy, David. We've been fooled. Be quiet and listen," and he put his ear to the panel.

There was a sudden silence in the room. For at least a minute the two boys stood pressed against the locked door and then David turned round and flopped on the nearest chair.

"Believe it or not," he said, "Those two know each other. I've just heard Brown say, 'Bit drastic, wasn't it? I'd never have got back but for them.' I think that's what he said, didn't he, Jon?"

"That's it. They've either gone to Donaldson's room or down to the kitchen. I'm not feeling very proud of myself. How they must be laughing at us... Sorry, girls."

"What did I tell you?" Penny stormed. "I knew that man was no good. Now, at least, we know how we stand with him. Donaldson must have known all the time that Brown was hiding on the moor. They're in league with each other. They're all spies and now something terrific is going to happen and we're locked in here... Why don't you boys *do* something? Can't you smash the door down?"

But the door was of solid mahogany with a heavy lock and they searched the room in vain for something with which they might smash in the panels. Jon remembered his pocket knife, but the blade snapped when he tried it on the screws of the lock. The two windows offered no chance of escape, for

they were much too far from the ground to risk a jump and there was no creeper nor ivy on the walls. And as they were at the side of the house they could see neither the front drive nor the track down to the stepping stones.

Then Peter suggested that they sit down for ten minutes and tell each other what had been happening during the day.

"We can take turns to stand by the door and if the sentry hears as much as a whisper outside he must warn us. I believe those two have gone off together, but I expect they'll come back. They only want us out of the way--
----"

"While they do their traitors' business," Dickie interrupted. "This is a fantastic adventure. We've been locked in places before but not as big as this one. I wonder if we'll starve to death?"

"We'll eat Mackie first," Jon said grimly and then quickly apologized. "Sorry, Mary. Mackie can eat me first. Dickie is the first sentry. Listen with your ear against the door and if you hear anybody outside just give the warning. When it's your turn to tell us what you've been doing we'll change the sentry."

Jon and David told their story first and the others were impressed by their description of the man on the helicopter whom David believed to be Sandy.

"You know what happened after we heard the saucer whining above the fog, and maybe something you tell us will help to sort out what those three men mean to each other," David finished. "I can't see where Green comes in now. He's a poor type anyway."

Then Peter told them what happened to Mary and her at the White Lion and of how she had not accepted Green's invitation to go into Princetown in his car.

"Anyway, I'm sorry we couldn't do more," she said. "Penny's story is much more interesting and Dickie's is, as usual, terrific."

The sentry turned from the door.

"Kidnapped!" he snapped, then jammed his ear to the door again.

But Penny was finding it impossible to sit still while she talked.

"It's no use glaring at me like that, Jon. If I want to pace up and down my cage nobody is going to stop me. Just listen carefully and don't innerrupt as Mary says... As soon as Peter and Mary had gone off, Dickie and I went back to the house and looked in the kitchen for Donaldson. He wasn't there and he wasn't in our room. We thought we'd search the house and went up to the top floor. Dickie was just going to listen at the door of Donaldson's room when he came out suddenly and made us look fools. I must say he looked absolutely livid for a sec. and locked the door behind him and put the key in his pocket. He asked what we wanted and all I could say was that we wondered where he was. Then he waited for us to go downstairs first.

"We hung about in the hall and the kitchen and didn't like it at all. He must have known that we weren't going to let him out of our sight and once or twice I caught him grinning to himself. I tried to ask him questions about the Moor and being at sea; and then you rang up the first time. I didn't dare leave Dickie alone with him while I ran down the drive, and I was certain that Donaldson wanted to use that telephone. I think that he's always using it, but anyway I got Dickie outside, told him what you said, and he went off like a flash of lightning... If you like I'll be sentry now and Dickie can make his own excuses for doing what he did... Come on, Richard Morton."

So Dickie took up the tale,

"I'll tell you quick as I can, I promise, 'cos we've got to escape from here... Mary and me are getting hungry. Anyway, Penny told me about what Peter had said and I knew the number of the car, although I've forgot it now and I hope it doesn't matter. I got to the end of the drive and there isn't really a place to hide, so I just stopped there and looked at the cars. And along soon comes Mr Green. Then it was all rather peculiar 'cos he stopped and grinned at me and told me about leaving Peter and Mary at Hexworthy and said would I like to go and have an ice with him in Princetown? He seemed jolly nice acksherley and I wasn't afraid of him, although I wished Mary was there. So I thought I'd go with him and do some detecting on him for you. I didn't think he could do anything to me, but afterwards I was sorry because

I forgot to let Penny know what had happened. Anyway he asked me some very rude and pertinent questions-----"

"Such as, little man?" David asked.

"Such as why had we come to King's Holt and when, and who was my father and Penny's father and what did they do, until I got much more muddled up than I really was... Don't innerupt, Jon. I'm plain enough, aren't I? I mean I pretended to be more muddled up than I was and told him not to bully me 'cos I couldn't understand what he was talking about and what about that ice."

He paused for breath and Jon looked at him in grudging admiration.

"Anyway," Dickie went on, "he drove very fast and we whizzed along by the big hotel at Two Bridges and I wondered whether we were going to Princetown and I was glad when we went up the road to the left. It was quite exciting knowing that I was kidnapped, if you know what I mean... Sometimes he shouted at me, and once he spoke quietly an' stopped the car in a lonely place and said he'd give me a big present - a bike, he said - if I'd tell him what you were all doing exploring and worrying him and following him and had we told any grown-ups about him. Then I pretended to be very, very frightened 'cos he kept his hand on the door so I couldn't get out and I said I'd tell him everything he wanted to know when I'd had an ice, 'cos he was so kind... *And* I told him cars didn't suit me an' made me sick and then he drove on quickly to Princetown."

He was holding his audience now and knew it.

"Go on, Dickie," David said quietly. "You're not making up a story, are you?"

"Not this time," he grinned. "It really happened. When we got to Princetown I had a super idea. I remembered that Dan told us his mother kept a cafe called The Moorland Pixie, and there it was right on the main street, and I told him that was where I wanted my ice. He locked the car and in we went and I liked Mrs Dan very much. He said he wanted a coffee and I said I could manage two ices and six chocolate biscuits, and I ate 'em very

slowly. There was nobody else in there an' he started to bully me again with all those questions, so I had to think quickly what I could do. I was sure that he didn't really want to stay in Princetown, so I thought I'd escape and make him stay there, if you know what I mean..." and here he paused for breath again.

"We know what you mean,," Peter said. "Wish we'd been with you, Dickie."

"Well," he went on, "I had my big idea then. Suddenly I made a howling noise and put my hands on my tum and said I'd got an awful pain and then I ran out into Mrs Dan's kitchen at the back. An' then I told her quickly who I was and that we wanted to help Dan and that Mr Green had kidnapped me, but that I was going to let the air out of his tyres so that he couldn't escape and then I was coming back to have another ice. She laughed like anything and then let me out of a side door and I had to run across to where the car was parked and wait till nobody was looking. Then I let the air out of three tyres with a swoosh and came back the same way. Then I went back in the cafe and said I was all better now and had two more chocolate biscuits and he didn't know what to say... Well. I thought it would be good to keep him there as long as I could, specially when some more people came in and he couldn't bully me any more. But I told him a few things that didn't matter much and then when he was getting purple in the face I looked out of the window and saw the others getting out of a bus. That was pretty good so I told Mr Green I wouldn't be long, and ran out to say I was sorry I hadn't left a message where I'd gone, but I was jolly glad to see them... Now p'raps Peter could say what happened next," and he looked round as if he expected applause.

So Peter took up the tale.

"As soon as we decided that we should have to try and find Dickie we knew we'd have to go together. It didn't seem, after all, to have been a good idea for us to split up. We realized that this time we'd have to leave Donaldson alone, but Pen and I decided to hope for a bus into Princetown."

"Just a sec," Jon interrupted. "I meant to ask Dickie something... Did you say anything to Green about Donaldson, Dickie? I don't suppose it matters

much if you did, but it's interesting to know. And did he ask you about him?"

"No, he didn't," Dickie said quickly. "I wondered why he didn't, and then I didn't even say Donaldson was looking after us or anything like that. I'm sure I didn't. Was that all right?"

"Very all right," Jon agreed. "Sorry, Pete. Please go on."

"We didn't have to wait very long for a bus, fortunately, and almost as soon as we'd got out Dickie dashed across the road.

"He told us as quickly as he could what had happened and that he'd managed to let the air out of three of Green's tyres. You can guess that we were furious with Dickie for going off like that, but we'd just got to make the best of it and try and get back to King's Holt as soon as we could. We knew Green wouldn't be likely to give us a lift when he got his tyres blown up again! We wanted to see Dan's mother, too, and she's grand...

"Anyway, we put Mackie on the lead and walked across to the cafe just as Mr Green was coming out. I must say that he was very peevish, although Dickie thanked him very nicely for the ices and chocolate biscuits. It wasn't really so very funny, because I'm sure he didn't know what to say or do. Whatever part he has to play in this I'm sure he knew then that he was beaten. Now that we've seen him again down by the river we know for certain.

"We were just going into the cafe to meet Mrs Sturt when he noticed that his tyres were flat, and do you know I really was sorry for him then. He shook his fist at us and swore, and people turned round, so we went into The Moorland Pixie and Dickie introduced us to Dan's mother.

"While we were having something to eat Penny asked Mrs Sturt for a pen and paper and we wrote Dan a note saying that all sorts of things were happening and would he telephone us just as soon as he came in, and his mother promised to give it to him at once. She was sweet. When we went out I thought we might telephone here just to see if Donaldson answered. If he did I was going to tell him that we'd had lunch out. We tried from a call-

box four times but each time the number was engaged, which was very peculiar. Either he was talking all the time or else he'd left the receiver off... I'm getting hoarse now. You tell them about the strange men, Penny, while I listen at the door, although I'm sure we're alone in the house."

The girls changed places and David said:

"What's all this about strange men? You've been keeping this from us."

"We haven't had much chance to tell you our adventures," Penny retorted.

"You kept us quiet when you'd got Brown with you and the only chance we seem to get to talk is when we're locked in. There's not much more to tell but you must know it before we break out of here somehow. I'm like Dickie. I'm hungry. You'll hardly believe it, but Green was more than an hour trying to get his tyres blown up properly and we left Princetown before he did. We knew we should have to walk as a bus was not due for a while and Green roared past us down the hill on the way to Two Bridges. I suppose it took us about half an hour to walk down to the hotel and I was reminding them about that wood of dwarf trees one of you boys told us about. It was called Wistman's Wood, wasn't it?"

Jon nodded. "Dan told us about it. Dwarf oak trees all bent one way by the wind."

"That's it. I remembered it was up the valley of the Dart a little way and we were resting on the bridge and wondering whether we'd go along the river and look for it when we saw four men coming towards us along the track from the wood. There wasn't anything unusual about that except that, although we felt they were *supposed* to look like holiday-makers, somehow they didn't. I know that sounds silly but both Peter and I felt sure that something was wrong about them. The funny thing was that we had to walk another mile before a bus came along and during that time we saw three more lots of men. One party was walking on the moor, another lot was walking on the road and looking fed up, and the third lot were in a big, black car, but when we turned round they got out and walked slowly across the heather...

"We don't know what all this means but we're sure that those men weren't ordinary visitors. We think something peculiar is happening... There's not much more to tell. When we got back here there was no sign of Donaldson and his room was locked. We searched the place. Everything was tidy but he'd just gone and left no message and how he goes and comes I just don't know unless it's by flying saucer... *All right, Jon.* Surely you can take a joke?... We may as well tell you now that we knew we'd made rather a mess of what you'd asked us to do. Although we'd annoyed Green and possibly upset his plans we'd lost Donaldson too, and I s'pose we shall never know what he was doing between the time we telephoned and when we came back with Brown just now. Anyway, we decided to come and meet you, and the rest you know except that of course we heard another helicopter and a saucer too, but couldn't see either because of the mist... Now perhaps one of you can suggest how we're going to get out of here."

"We've got to get out," David agreed. "We must telephone the police now because all this is really serious. I'm sure Brown wasn't faking that twisted ankle, but what's happened to him now? What's Donaldson done with him? We know now that Donaldson is in this too and I think they've gone off together."

"And I hope they've left the telephone working, although I doubt it," Jon said grimly. "I agree we've got to get out quickly but I don't think it will be by the door. If only we'd got a rope."

"I've got an idea," Dickie shouted. "Let's make a rope out of the curtains. Cut 'em into strips and tie them together and then you can let Mary an' me out of the window and then we'll jolly well rescue you all."

This really was a good idea. The curtains were made of a sort of serge. Dickie stood on Jon's shoulders and pulled down the bamboo pole from which they were hanging and then, with Jon's knife, they cut them into strips and knotted them carefully. Two of the strips were weak and tore when they tested them, and when they dangled the complete "rope" from the window it looked to be about four feet short of the ground. Then, much to the twins' fury, the boys decided that it was too dangerous and risky for Dickie and Mary to be given the responsibility of exploring the house which might not, after all, be empty, and then fetching help.

Peter and Penny supported this decision; and then the latter said quietly, "I'm the one who's going. Jon and David are much too heavy and the rope will break. I'm lighter than Peter, too, and if you don't mind me saying so about the only thing I'm good at at school is gym. I promise you that I shall be all right. I'm used to ropes and you can lower me very gently, and once I'm down I promise you that Donaldson will never catch me. I'll get into the house somehow and if the key is still in the lock you'll be free in a sec. and then we'll try the telephone."

Jon and David protested that this was a ridiculous idea but they had to give way eventually because they knew that the rope would not take the weight of either of them.

It was horrible watching the strain on the knots as Penny went down, but they lowered her very, very slowly as she pushed herself away from the wall. Then as they let the last section over the sill the knots parted. Peter grabbed the end, stifled a scream as she missed and then saw that Penny had fallen about five feet into an untidy flower bed. She landed like a cat with the remains of the rope on the ground beside her. Jon wiped his forehead and said, "I hope she can find the key, because we shan't be able to haul anything up now."

"Don't worry," Dickie said. "Penny will think of something."

Penny looked up, waved, and smiled shakily.

Then she looked at her watch. Half-past six. She listened carefully but everything was very quiet. The sombre pines about the rutted drive were still and she had the horrid feeling that they were all waiting for something unknown. She looked up again, saw Jon leaning from the window and waved for the second time. She wished he was with her. Then she crept round to the front of the house before she lost her courage. There would never be any need to tell anyone how her heart was thumping. The front door was locked and she could not remember whether Peter had taken the key with her when they went out to meet the boys. Just for a second she wondered whether she would go back and call out to Peter and ask her; then she decided to try the back door first. On her way the silence was broken; she heard the sound of a heavy lorry. It seemed to come from the back of

the house, although she knew that it must be on the main road. The air was so still that sounds carried a long way.

She reached the courtyard and, before trying the back door, glanced down the track which led to the stepping stones. Then, with a sudden stab of fear, she saw a man running, stumbling, staggering towards her. A bare-headed little man in a tweed suit. Green. Running as if for his life. He saw her, raised an arm and gasped something she could not hear.

Penny was desperately afraid; she tried to scream, but her mouth was dry. She grabbed the handle of the back door and felt it turn. As she sobbed in relief she heard again the roaring of an engine, which this time she was sure was a car. Then Green's desperate, thudding footsteps were quite close. The door moved an inch and stuck. Desperately she pushed with all her strength, knowing that she must keep Green out. Whatever happened he must not catch her now. She saw his staring, terrified eyes and open mouth. The door moved a little but it was Green's strength added to her own that swung it back. He pushed her ahead of him into the scullery, but before he slammed and locked the door, she saw over his shoulder three other men racing up the track. It seemed to her, in that split second before the door shut, that these men were in khaki. Then, gasping for breath, Green grabbed her wrists and dragged her into the kitchen.

"Hide me!" he gasped. "You will hide me quickly or be sorry."

Penny was a red-head! All her terror vanished and anger took its place. He had dared to threaten her. She wrenched her wrists free and slapped his face. For a second they glared at each other as a red weal marked his pale cheek. She heard confused noises from outside and also from somewhere upstairs, and ran into the hall, snatching up a heavy brass candlestick on her way. Then she stopped and faced him.

"Don't you dare to touch me again. I'm not scared of you, and I won't be afraid to use this. We know all about you. We know you're a spy. We know you were spying round Rye and Dungeness. We know you were bitten by a guard dog down there and we know you're a coward... Keep off, else you'll be sorry."

His lips moved in his white face but no words came. From upstairs they could hear now the sound of barking, crashes and the splintering of wood. The great candlestick was heavy in her hand, but she did not dare take her eyes from him. Suddenly he stepped forward. With all her strength she aimed a blow at him, but the candlestick was so heavy that it slipped from her fingers and crashed to the floor.

"Now!" he panted. "Now, my dear. Now listen to me. You must hide me. Those men outside are mistaken. I've done nothing wrong. I'm just on holiday here and a very serious mistake has been made... You must hide me or let me out of the front door, and then I promise I won't hurt you."

He stepped forward again just as there came a rain of blows on the back door. With a crazy courage she laughed at him as he forced her back towards the front door.

"There's no mistake. You're a spy and you're caught now. You can't escape... *Jon! We're down here. In the hall.*"

Green grabbed at her. She dodged his blow but slipped and fell on the bottom stair. An agonizing pain shot up her back. Above she heard the door of their room burst open. Then Mackie, with Jon jumping the stairs three at a time behind him, hurtled down to the rescue. Green fumbled for the catch of the front door just as it was flung back to show Donaldson on the threshold.

Green turned, stooped for the heavy candlestick and flung it at the newcomer. Penny stood up shakily and watched with astonishment as Jon strode across the hall, and with the finest uppercut of his life hit Green full on the point of the chin.

And as the shabby little man in the tweed suit slipped slowly to the floor, Donaldson, with a grim smile said, "Nice work, Jon. Couldn't have done it better myself. Sorry I had to lock you kids in, but it was the only way to keep you out of the way and out of trouble. Seems to have been a waste of time though."

13. The Truth at Last

Jenny could hardly believe that what she had just been through had really happened. She stepped down from the bottom stair and stared without speaking at the scene before her. The front door was open; Donaldson, with a smile of admiration, was watching Jon as he stood over Green, who was crouching on the floor with one hand feeling his chin. What was it Donaldson had said? "Nice work, Jon! Couldn't have done it better myself," and "Sorry I had to lock you in."

So he had been their friend all the time?

Jon was suddenly at her side.

"He didn't touch you, did he, Pen? Dirty little rat! Sure you're all right?"

Her back hurt where she had fallen on the stair and the last ten minutes seemed like a dream. She found her voice, which was surprisingly choky as she said, "I tried to hit him with that candlestick, but it was too heavy and I mucked it... I s'pose you all realise that Mr Donaldson is our friend. At least he seems to be. He thinks Jon is wonderful," and she began to laugh and sat down on the bottom stair again.

Before anyone could say anything three soldiers ran into the hall.

"Get up," Donaldson said to Green, and then to the soldiers, "That's one of them. Take him away. There's a truck outside."

Mary ran out after them and saw, to her astonishment, an army lorry in the drive, She captured the barking Macbeth and then saw Dan wheeling his bicycle up to the house with a soldier at his side.

"Hello, Dan. What are you doing with that soldier? The most peculiar things are happening here and we've had the most wonderful adventures... You know we told you about our Mr Donaldson... Well, Dan. He isn't the Mr Donaldson we thought. Quite suddenly he's somebody quite different, but it's most difficult to explain... What's this soldier doing?"

"Wish I knew, Mary. Can't understand what's happening round here! There are soldiers all over the place. What's going on?"

"Penny has just been fighting Green, who is in that lorry. We've been locked in our room and smashed the door down and Dickie was kidnapped this morning and then there's been this muddle about Mr Donaldson. You'd better come in and speak to him."

The young soldier, who seemed to be amused by Mary, turned to her and said, "You really living in this place?" but then Donaldson came out and recognized Dan.

"I been trying to explain about us," Mary said, "but I wish you'd do something, Mr Donaldson. You know Dan, don't you?"

Donaldson said something to the soldier that neither of them could hear. Then, "Of course I do. You'd better come in, young man. We seem to have a story for you, but you're to send nothing off until I give you permission, and you're not to leave the house either. Understand?"

"Yes - sir," Dan said as if he was dazed. "Thank you very much... What's been happening?"

Donaldson laughed as he led the way back into the house. "There's nothing I can do for a while now," he said. "Could you girls get us some tea and something to eat? I know that either of you will make a better job of it than I shall. I'm not really much of a cook."

Dan looked round in astonishment. It was difficult enough for him to grasp what had happened to Donaldson, but he was beginning to realize that the story he had been waiting for so long had arrived.

"We've got something for you now, Dan," Jon shouted. "You'll never believe us, but we'll come to Plymouth with you if you like and prove to your editor that it's true."

"It is true, Dan," Peter smiled. "We really have discovered something today. Green is a spy and he's just been arrested. Nobody knows who Mr

Donaldson is except that he seems to be very important and on our side. He's just going to tell us all about it. Have you asked him whether you can have the story?"

Dan smiled at Donaldson. "But not till you agree it can go? That's it, isn't it?"

Donaldson nodded and suggested tea again. "How do you feel, Penny? Sure you're all right?"

She slid off the table and felt herself gingerly.

"I think so. A bit sore. You must have been polishing the floor... You'd better come and help us get a meal, Dan, and we'll tell you what's been happening."

All of them, except Donaldson, trooped into the kitchen after the girls, and soon bacon and eggs were sizzling. Their new friend came in just as the tea was being made with a broad smile on his face.

"Everything's going well," he said. "We'll sit down for half an hour and I'll try and tell you some of the things you want to know."

"Tell us about that chap Brown before we sit down," David said. "What's happened to him?"

"Safe in hospital in Plymouth. He'll be all right. He's very grateful for what you all did to help him. He'd never have got here without you. The pictures he took of the helicopter and the men in it will be important."

"Is his name Brown?" Penny asked.

"It will do as well as another," Donaldson smiled. "Sometimes he's known as 564."

Penny put her hand to her forehead. "564? I remember that number." Then she flushed. "Of course. You were saying something about 564 on the 'phone that morning..." and she stopped in confusion.

"Ah, yes," Donaldson smiled. "I remember. You fell through the front door just as I was ordering potatoes."

"I don't believe you were doing any such thing," Penny said indignantly. "I didn't believe it at the time, either... What's the matter with you, Dickie? Where have you been?"

Nobody had noticed that Dickie had not been with them for ten minutes. He was now almost stuttering with excitement.

"Jus' listen to me... And specially you, Mr Donaldson. This house is utterly surrounded by soldiers. They're everywhere. Are we in a war or something?"

"Calm down, son," Donaldson said. "It's not a war but it is something. The men are there to look after us, but we shan't need them. Sit down, and I'll tell you what you've got mixed up in... Yes, Dan? What's worrying you?"

"Is what you're going to tell us secret and confidential? You know I want a story for my paper, don't you, sir? I want it more than anything I can think of. If I could telephone what you're going to tell us now it would be in time for tomorrow's paper, but of course if you say I can't then that's the end of it."

"I know how much you want your story, Dan, and I've spoken to your editor about it. You shall have an exclusive story before you leave King's Holt tonight and it will be in tomorrow's paper, although I must see what you're going to say before you send it... Now girls. Let's begin. I shall enjoy being waited on by you. Pleasant change!

"Now, one thing I want to know first," Donaldson smiled. "How did you get out of your room?"

"We've spoiled the door," David said grimly. "Dickie thought of cutting the curtains into strips and making them into a rope, which Penny went down like a monkey. We heard a lorry and then a lot of noise at the back of the house, and after a bit we heard Penny shouting at Green, She didn't realize what a noise she was making. I bet she was mad!"

"I was!" Penny admitted. "But how did you bash the door down so that Jon could do his famous rescue act?"

"Mary found an old iron grate under a pile of newspapers at the bottom of a cupboard and Jon and I managed to smash the panels with that. The key was in the lock and Jon was down the stairs before we'd sorted ourselves out. We were rather dumb not to have found it before but we thought we'd looked everywhere... Now tell us why you wanted us out of the way."

Donaldson smiled at the girls and began his story.

"The man you know as Green is, as you guessed, a spy, but not a very important one. We could have got him months ago but we hoped he'd lead us to someone much more important. He's done what we wanted, and at any time within the next hour or two we shall know that we've cleared up a nasty situation... Tomorrow it will be publicly announced that Britain has perfected what can loosely be called a 'flying saucer'. There are several places in the British Isles where experiments with small prototypes of saucers have been made for ten years or more. This is one of them and-----"

"There's one at Lydd by Dungeness," Penny interrupted. "Jon and I live at Rye and we saw a saucer there one night. Green was staying at Mrs Warrender's hotel and he was spying there. We saw him."

"We knew that," Donaldson smiled. "Knew he'd been down there, and of course we knew you two lived at Rye. It was odd that you followed Green here, but he goes all over the country posing as an innocent tourist, though he was losing his touch as you know."

He paused for a drink of tea. and Jon said abruptly:

"The news about the saucers is wonderful, of course. Nobody can guess what such a discovery may mean to the world, but what about you, sir? I suppose you're Secret Service? We can't expect you to tell us more but was the man you call 564 the same?"

Donaldson nodded. "He is. We were working together. The few picked scientists at the Secret Station up on the Moor did not know that they were going to be attacked tonight. Yes, that was the plan but it won't come off. The place is surrounded and there will be aircraft up to deal with any helicopters. Green's job was to find out what precautions we were taking to guard the station, and he did discover that 564 was what Dickie would dramatically call a 'counter spy'."

"That's it," Dickie said excitedly. "That's just it... The awful part of all this is that not a single chap at school will believe that this ever happened to me and that I'm acksherley sitting down here with a super Secret Service chap - if you know what I mean."

"We know what you mean," Peter said. And then to Donaldson, "tell us more about poor Mr Brown and then how you got to King's Holt. We were dull, weren't we?"

"No, you weren't, Peter. You were all very intelligent and extremely kind to me. Penny thought I was up to no good but I don't blame her... Brown's a good bloke. He's been on the Moor for three weeks in the burrow he dug for himself. It took him some time to get himself established and since I've been here I've had to take food up to him at night. We met half-way."

"But how did he keep in touch?" Jon persisted. "Had he got radio? There wasn't a set in his cave."

"Yes, he had, but it was some distance from his hide-out, I believe. He told me that he didn't want it too close. I've got a transmitter and receiver in my room here. We kept in touch... As soon as we received our orders and knew that the enemy was planning to raid this place - they called the operation 'Aunt Edith', by the way - 564 went into his burrow. We'd had our eyes on King's Holt and wondered whether to take it over, but when we heard that Mr and Mrs Warrender were renting it for some months and bringing some young people with them it seemed a good idea for me to come here as a servant. You've no idea how much you've all helped me, but I do hope you see now why I had to keep you out of the way while I looked after 564 and made other preparations. Your return to the house earlier than I expected - and the change in the weather - were very fortunate."

"You seemed very surprised to see 564 when we brought him here," David said.

"I was. How should I know that he'd been silly enough to fall down a ravine? I was anxious about him as he had not sent in the usual signal."

"Why was he so anxious about the camera?"

"The enemy's helicopter, which Jon and David saw today, was the first one used by them. 564 wanted a picture of it and *of the men in it* for future identification. We believe that Green's chief was in that machine and if, as I suspect, we shall catch him tonight it would be as well to have that extra proof."

"The man who came down the ladder from the helicopter when 564 had fallen down the ravine knew Green and had been with him the day before," David said, and told him of their meeting with the man they called "Sandy". "I'm almost sure that he was the same man," he finished.

Donaldson looked at them admiringly.

"You've all been very useful. I think that's the man we want. One thing, I hope Mr and Mrs Warrender will forgive me for the trick I've had to play on them. I should have told them more if they had not gone away, but it did make things easier for the house to be empty for most of today."

"But what's going to happen now?" Penny persisted. "How much longer are we going to be guarded in here? How are the spies going to attack the station?"

"There are soldiers hiding all round the station. The fighters are patrolling the sky, With the launch of the last 'saucer' from this station today its work is finished. The few scientists still there are well guarded, for the enemy meant to kidnap at least one of them tonight."

"We saw a lot of strange men round Two Bridges and on the road," Peter said. "We didn't like the look of them. Were they soldiers in disguise?"

Donaldson smiled. "No. Enemy's men. They must have been sent to patrol the Moor. The attack is expected to come by helicopter, and I think these strangers have been hired to make sure that none of the people in the station escape. There are only a few there now anyway and their work is over. They're safe enough and the men you saw will be in the net by now."

"It's the saucers I want to know about," Jon persisted.

Donaldson shrugged. "I couldn't tell you even if I knew, Jon. Like all the inventions of the last fifty years or so it might be a great step forward if man could only learn to use it properly. Even what you have seen here doesn't suggest that he is learning very fast, but we must all be thankful that the secret is ours."

Then his mood changed and he smiled at the girls as he got up from the table. "Have you forgiven me? Tomorrow you'll be able to get on with your holiday."

"We shall miss you," Penny said seriously.

"But my story, sir?" Dan said. "How much of what you've told us may I write? When can I ring up the paper? What's going to happen next?"

"I promised you a story, Dan. You can all come up on the roof now."

Even the twins were quiet as they all climbed over the window sill at the end of the top landing to a flat square of leaded roof.

The sun was down now and the sky, like blue velvet, was spangled with stars. Peter wondered if there had ever been a lovelier night.

"Listen carefully now," Donaldson said as he looked at his watch.

"It's the soldiers I want to see," Dickie whispered hoarsely. "There's hundreds of 'em down there. I'd rather be with them if you don't mind, Mr Donaldson. Nothing seems to be happening here."

"That's one reason why you're here, son. You'll be able to go down soon. Just listen."

Away to the south-west beyond the bulk of Swincombe Tor the sky glowed faintly.

"The lights of Plymouth," Dan explained. "We see them from Princetown on a clear night like this... I can hear something."

They all heard the distant throb of a helicopter's engine.

"Not ours," Donaldson said. "We're not using them. They'll probably send two but they won't be allowed to land at the station."

"What's going to stop them?" David asked. "Will they be armed?"

"Possibly. Watch now. He's coming fast."

The enemy 'copter was approaching from the east and Penny was pointing excitedly into the sky above the station.

"I can see it now. It's hovering!"

Suddenly the sharp, white beam of a searchlight from the roof of the station stabbed the sky and there was the machine picked out against the night. The engine throbbed louder but the beam followed the helicopter as it tried to dodge. Then, roaring from the west, like black avengers, came two fighting jets. The searchlight held the 'copter and above the sound of the engine they heard, for a moment, the stutter of machine-gun fire.

Peter covered her eyes and turned away as Donaldson put his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry, my dear. They won't shoot it down unless they have to do so. They're forcing it down and the army is ready to take over. We want the men in the helicopter badly... If another helicopter comes over they'll deal with it in the same way... I'm going to send a radio signal from my room now, but I'll meet you all downstairs in a few minutes... Don't go outside yet."

They stood in silence for a few minutes when he had gone. No searchlight now and the sky was dark. The helicopter was down and the fighters

zooming up into the night again.

"Come on, Penny," Peter said unexpectedly. "I've had enough of today. Let's go to bed."

They went down into the hall together. Dan sat at the table, brought a notebook from his pocket and began to scribble. Peter yawned and looked over his shoulder. Jon and David sat on the bottom stair while the twins went towards the kitchen. Penny was following them when the telephone shrilled. They stared at each other in surprised silence as she ran to answer it. The boys (except Dan) stood up. The twins tip-toed back and Peter turned to see a happy smile on her friend's face.

"Yes, Mother," she said. "How wonderful of you to 'phone. Yes, thank you, I think we're all very well indeed considering... Considering what? It's difficult to explain now, but I'm a bit sore where I fell on the floor... No, darling. I just slipped," and here she stifled a giggle and covered the talking end of the receiver while she listened. The others strained in vain to hear the thin voice coming over the wire. Then Penny spoke again. "Yes, of course we've missed you and it will be wonderful to see you again so soon... Give my love to Dad... 'Bye," and she collapsed in the nearest chair.

"That was my darling mother. They've had enough of Cornwall already. Daddy is missing his fishing and they both think we must be terribly bored. She said she didn't think anything exciting could have happened to us, but we're not to worry because they'll be home tomorrow morning... What a surprise she's going to have."

"I'm afraid she is," Donaldson said from the top of the stairs. "I came down to tell you that we've got the man we want, and the second helicopter went the way of the first. I couldn't help overhearing Penny and I do feel very bad about Mrs Warrender. I hope she won't be very angry with me. I shall stay till she comes because I must give in my notice."

Penny looked up at him and smiled.